The New Criterion

March 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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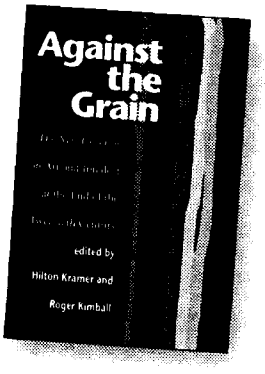

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Associate Editor *David Yezzi*
Assistant to the Editors *Francesca Marx*
Editorial Intern *Maxwell Watman*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

Christian Caryl is a writer and translator who devides his time between Moscow and Berlin.

Louis V. Galdieri reviewed a new translation, by R. Bracht Branham and Daniel Kinney, of Petronius's *Satyrica* in our October 1996 issue.

Roger Kimball is the author of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (HarperPerennial).

William Logan's forthcoming book of poems is *Vain Empires*.

Mario Naves reviews art regularly for *The New Criterion*.

John Simon reviews theater for *New York* magazine and films for *National Review*.

Louis Simpson's *Modern Poets of France with English Translations* is forthcoming from Story Line Press in the fall.

Mark Steyn is the film critic of the London *Spectator*.

Karen Wilkin's latest book, *Cézanne*, was published recently by Abbeville Press.

Keith Windschuttle's latest book, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline Is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, is forthcoming from The Free Press.

Renee Winegarten's profile "Women & Politics: Madame de Genlis" appeared in our September 1996 issue.

David Yezzi reviews books regularly for *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*.

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Notes & Comments: March 1997

The bureaucratic superhighway

Whatever else can be said about it, the Internet is certainly a godsend to politicians looking for new ways to spend the public's money. It offers everything: a seductively mystifying technology, the vague promise of unlimited "educational" benefits, and the potential for creating dozens of new regulations, permits, certification requirements, and training programs—along with, of course, a vast new government bureaucracy to oversee it all.

A recent Associated Press story brought this home to us. Reporting on President Clinton's promise to link "every American classroom and library to the computer Internet" by the year 2000, the story noted that the Department of Education had released the first $200 million—note the ominous word "first"—in grants for computer equipment and training. In his weekly radio address, the story continued, President Clinton lamented the fact that only a fifth of public school teachers were using advanced telecommunications for teaching and only 13 percent of public schools required that teachers be trained in using the Internet. The story also noted that the President's 1998 budget—which includes $51 *billion* for "education"—had earmarked $500 million for "technology literacy."

In fact, the two most overrated words in the educational establishment just now are "computer" and "Internet." To be sure, computers are wonderful tools, and the Internet provides easy access to untold amounts of information. But, as always, it is important to distinguish between an excellent means of communication and excellent communications. Computers offer the former; only educated men and women can manage the latter.

The cult of fostering "computer literacy" is little more than the latest bureaucratic boondoggle—an entrance not only onto the information superhighway but also onto the bureaucratic superhighway. Its chief effect will be to relieve the public of as much money as possible by invoking the irresistible talisman of "education." Never mind that the educational benefits of "computer literacy" programs are dubious at best: the word "education" acts like a magic charm on many people, causing them to lie down, dissolve into a trance, and open their wallets.

As anyone who actually uses computers and the Internet knows, the whole mystique of "computer literacy" is nine-tenths techno-babble. It bears roughly the same relation to ordinary literacy as "free love" does to the genuine article. It is important

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to recognize that what really is meant by "computer literacy" is nothing more than learning to use a few popular word-processing and number-crunching programs—programs whose designers have spent millions upon millions of dollars making them easy for laymen to use. Being "computer literate" does not mean understanding how computers really work or learning how to write high-level code. It simply means being able to manipulate the latest in home appliances. As the phrase is generally used, being "computer literate" requires less physical coordination than learning to ride a bicycle and only slightly more conceptual dexterity than learning to program a video tape player.

We wonder how long it will be before the public cottons onto to this educational scam. One Senator, commenting critically on President Clinton's proposed educational programs, noted that there were already 760 Federal education programs in place, 32 of which were devoted to literacy. To hear some politicians wail on about education, you would never know that the United States already spends far more per pupil than any other country on earth. But with what results? Every other day, it seems, we get a new report about American students' poor performance in mathematics, their inability to read, their appalling ignorance of major historical facts. But, as the example of parochial schools has shown again and again, the problem is not money. Real improvement in education requires not lavish spending and technological gimmicks, but committed teachers willing to spend time insisting that students learn the basics: how to read, write, and calculate effectively. Parochial schools spend only a tiny fraction per pupil of what public schools do; but their students consistently emerge both better educated and better behaved because they battened not on the latest educational and sociological fads but on materials and ideas that have stood the test of time.

What is needed is not a crash program in "computer literacy" or linking schools and libraries to the Internet but a return to the fundamentals of good education. These are to be had not by sitting in front of a video display terminal but from the pages of history, literature, and science—what used to be called a liberal education. An educated person may well know how to use a computer effectively; but, aiming to be literate, he would disdain "computer literacy" as the chimera that it is.

Accentuating the negative

Religion does a great many things in addition to teaching the rights and wrongs of moral behavior. Any religion worthy of the name is also a repository of spiritual insight, metaphysical speculation, consoling rituals, and communal identity. But a religious tradition that has given up on morality is well on its way to obsolescence.

We had occasion to ponder this truth recently when a friend sent us a story from the January 26 issue of *The Sunday Times* of London. Under the somewhat jocular title "Holy Moses! It's the Nine Commandments say vicars," the *Times* reported on the disturbing results of a random poll of some two hundred Anglican vicars. Only a third of those polled could remember all ten of the commandments; some could remember only two of the ten. And it is significant, we think, that the three proscriptions most frequently recalled had to do with property and sex: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house," "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife," and "Thou shalt not commit adultery." God, apparently, does not much figure into the vicars' meditations these days.

The *Times* noted that the poll results "have been interpreted as a sad indictment of the

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standards and attitudes of modern clergy." We can see why. Canon Peter Goodridge from Cornwall informed readers of the *Times* that "the Ten Commandments are not terribly important for Christian living today. They do not answer the real moral problems affecting modern society." Really? Leaving aside the question of what the good Canon understands as "the real moral problems affecting modern society," we did wonder just what he meant by "Christian living." A third of the vicars polled said they did not believe in the Virgin Birth; a fifth said they did not believe in the devil; one in ten said he did not believe in the Second Coming; one in twenty of those entrusted to inculcate the doctrines of the Church said he did not believe that Jesus performed miracles. At the same time there was widespread support for sex out of wedlock and homosexual behavior, both of which are forbidden by official church teaching. The *Times* did not, alas, report on how many vicars think that they are entitled to a living from a church whose central doctrines they disbelieve; more, perhaps, than believe in the divinity of Christ.

The *Times* made it clear that, whatever embarrassment they might have felt at having been caught out on the Ten Commandments, many vicars thought that they were championing important social freedoms that were more "relevant" to contemporary life than the moral teachings of the Bible. This, clearly, is a subject of immense complexity. But in essence, we think that G. K. Chesterton had it right: "Almost every contemporary proposal to bring freedom into the church," he wrote, "is simply a proposal to bring tyranny into the world." It used to be that clergymen could be counted on to understand this. No longer. According to the Rev. Geoffrey Shilock of Worcestershire, for example, the "trouble" with the Ten Commandments "is that they are very negative . . . most people prefer a more positive approach." Now why didn't Moses consider that when God first communicated the Ten Commandments? Come to think of it, the entire Bible is littered with what Rev. Shilock would no doubt abjure as a "negative approach," beginning with the early chapters of Genesis. If only God hadn't accentuated the negative by forbidding Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!

There is also what we might call a New Age component to this latest symptom of religious disintegration. According to the *Times*, "two vicars said they did not even believe in heaven, yet more than half believe in life on other planets." As generally happens when religious orthodoxy is under attack, what rushes in to fill the vacuum is something that makes far more rigorous demands on belief. The real alternative to faith, it seems, is not unbelief but some unseemly form of credulousness.

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The future of the European past: VII

The real stuff of history

by Keith Windschuttle

If an Oxford don had set out in the 1960s on the formidable task of writing a history of the world in the last millennium, almost certainly his main theme would have been the rise to dominance of the West, especially in the areas of science, politics, and economic and military power. This would have been true no matter which side he supported in the great ideological divide of the Cold War. Both the political Left and the Right had little doubt the West was the vanguard of history. The major Asian civilizations might have held vastly greater populations but for at least five hundred out of the past thousand years they had been on the receiving end of the great historical movements of the era rather than out in front, setting the pace.

In the Sixties, the history of Asia would have been written as something of a tragedy, a story of opportunities lost, of the closing of minds, of political weakness and disintegration. China, in particular, would have been treated as a sorry case, a country that began the millennium technologically advanced, wealthy, politically and militarily powerful, keenly interested in navigation and exploration, but which ended the era as one of the most backward countries in the world on almost every one of these scores, its population decimated by famine and ruled by an inept tyranny. In contrast, the small fiefdoms that constituted Christendom in the eleventh century had risen to become masters of the world, with their populations wealthy beyond belief, well-educated, and spread around the globe, throughout Western Europe, the Americas, and Oceania.

How things have changed within thirty years! I am not, mind you, referring to the reality of the comparative distribution of wealth, intelligence, and power in the world, but to the way our Oxford don would address his subject matter in the 1990s. Professor Felipe Fernández-Armesto, a member of the modern history faculty of that university, has provided in his recent book *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years*[1] just such a dramatic reappraisal. He sees the old version of the story reflecting not the truth about global influence but merely the inflated egocentrism of Western commentators. The imagined dominance of the West was "later, feebler and briefer than is commonly supposed," he claims, and was "neither foreordained nor enduring." Rather than China being the great loser of the period, the author sees the most stable feature of the past millennium as "an almost continuous history of Chinese preponderance." Europe has been but "a small promontory of Asia." The latter is where the most important and lasting business of humanity has been taking place all this time. Moreover, at the end of this mil-

1 *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years*, by Felipe Fernández-Armesto; Touchstone Books, 816 pages, $18 paper.

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lennium, he says, the brief initiative enjoyed by the West is now returning to the shores of the Pacific. So, he begins and ends his book with the achievements of the civilizations of Asia, especially Japan and China.

Throughout the text, he rebukes Western ethnocentrism at almost every opportunity.

Fernández-Armesto devotes more space to Juan and Eva Perón than to Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt combined. He has more pages on Mao Tse-tung and Joseph Stalin than any other political figures in the book, despite the fact that neither built a Communist regime that survived more than one generation beyond his own death. As for Western intellectuals, neither Francis Bacon, John Locke, David Hume, nor Immanuel Kant are discussed at all.

Not for him the assessment by Adam Smith that the two most important historical events of the last thousand years were the decision of the Portuguese to round the Cape of Good Hope and open a trade route to India, and the funding by Spain's Ferdinand and Isabella of the voyage of Christopher Columbus to America. No, both events were overshadowed even in their own day by the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into the Mediterranean, by far the most world shattering imperial expansion of the fifteenth century, he maintains. Moreover, the rise of capitalism in Western Europe was neither unique nor as momentous as economic historians and theorists like to imagine. Up to the early nineteenth century, for instance, the merchants of Canton were vastly richer than those of Europe. Wu Ping-Chien could have bought and sold banking empires like that of the Rothschilds several times over, he claims. It was only through military victory in the Opium War of 1839–42 that the European "barbarians" and "parasites" (his terminology) managed to claw back the difference. Eventually, he notes with satisfaction, the gains the British made on Chinese territory turned out to be but transitory toeholds.

This kind of approach dominates Fernández-Armesto's methodology of selection and judgment about what is important. The most prominent individuals who bestride his historic stage turn out to be those people most of us had regarded as the losers and has-beens. For instance, he has several pages about Montezuma but no mention of Ferdinand and Isabella. He devotes more space to Juan and Eva Perón than to Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt combined. He has more pages on Mao Tse-tung and Joseph Stalin than any other political figures in the book, despite the fact that neither built a Communist regime that survived more than one generation beyond his own death. St. Elizabeth of Hungary gets a mention but Elizabeth I of England gets none. As for Western intellectuals, neither Francis Bacon, John Locke, David Hume, nor Immanuel Kant are discussed at all. Neither Mozart nor Michelangelo make the team. The index does not list the category "philosophy" but does contain thirteen pages of references to shamans and shamanism. Most of the individuals Fernández-Armesto writes about are selected for their literary interest, because of what they reveal about the cultures he is describing or because they enliven the story with idiosyncrasies and paradoxical behaviors. Only a minority are there because they have been powerful or influential enough to affect the course of history, that is, to *change* history.

Though he eschews the kind of simplicities familiarly associated with theoretical or sociological explanations of history

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(he easily demolishes, for example, the thesis that the Protestant work ethic created capitalism), the author is operating with his own version of the great impersonal forces that change the fortunes of nations. His thesis is that the fate of civilizations has been defined by the seas and that the current of world history has shifted over the last thousand years from the China Sea to the Mediterranean, then to the Atlantic and now back again to the Pacific Rim. Crucial to his story are the opportunities provided by things like the direction of the prevailing winds, the navigability of the rivers, the quality of the climate, and the nature of the topography. Compared to these great forces of destiny, the impact of the Alexanders, the Caesars, and the Napoleons of the world, and the political influence of systems such as democracy, autocracy, and bureaucracy, have been puny.

As the year 2000 approaches, *Millennium*, a generously illustrated book of 816 pages published simultaneously in several translated editions, is the first of what is likely to be a number of its kind. It should have been a matter of some satisfaction that a well-accredited scholar like Fernández-Armesto had got in so early to set the standard for the genre. Instead, this book and its inevitable imitators tell us far less about the real fate of humanity in the last thousand years and far more about what has gone wrong with the writing of history in recent decades. *Millennium* was published in 1995 but written between 1991 and 1993. This timing seems to be part of its author's problem. He began writing at the end of the economic boom of the 1980s which saw both Japan and newly capitalist China set record-breaking economic growth rates that appeared to be recasting the order of the world's wealth and power. What should have been apparent to any historian taking the long view, of course, was that such bubbles usually burst. By the time Fernández-Armesto had finished writing, economic recession in Japan and runaway inflation in China had removed the aura of apparent economic invincibility from both countries and had reduced their prospects from the celestial to a more earthly level. In this sense, the symbol the author chooses in his prologue to show how the world has changed so dramatically—a London restaurant which used to serve French food but now offers Japanese—is only too appropriate. Today, in all the major Western cities, fashions in ethnic food change as rapidly as fashions in clothing. The restaurateur who switches his menus and decor from one cuisine to another is making the most trivial comment possible about the shifting stakes of world power.

There is, however, a malaise at work here far more crippling than the common mistake of assuming the short-term detours of one's own time have set the long-term course of the future. Fernández-Armesto's book is an agglomeration of several of the most debilitating tendencies that have emerged in the writing of history since the Second World War. Some of these afflictions have been political, especially the tendency to diminish our European past and to elevate that of just about every other part of the globe, no matter what the record. Others have been methodological, the adoption of practices in historical research and writing that have complemented these political judgments and without which, indeed, the political points could not have been made. Ironically enough, the worst methodological offenders have been the practitioners of the most nationally chauvinistic of all the post-1945 European schools of history, that of France. The writer upon whom Fernández-Armesto has most modeled his work is the French historian Fernand Braudel, the editor from 1956 until his death in 1985 of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. Braudel has written great tomes about periods almost as expansive as the millennium itself including the huge three-volume *Civilisation and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* and the two-volume *The Identity of France*, which stretches from Roman Gaul to the Second World War.

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Like the other practitioners of the *Annales* school, Braudel describes himself as a "structuralist historian," although his work is sometimes also called "total history." The term "structuralism" derives from anthropology and emphasizes not the cut and thrust of historical action but the purported framework, or underlying constants, that govern what action takes place. While other French historians of similar persuasion, such as Michel Foucault, describe the underlying framework as ideological, Braudel claims it is geographical. The first half of the book that made his name, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), is devoted to the role of the environment in the late sixteenth century, with chapters on objects such as peninsulas, mountains, plateaux, plains, seas, coasts, and climate. Only in his second half does the author stoop to focus upon the affairs of man, but even here he is mainly interested in trends in demography, trade balances, transportation, and social classes. Though Phillip II of Spain is acknowledged in the book's title, this is merely to date the period under discussion. Braudel regards monarchs as interesting only in that they represent the category "monarchy." Phillip himself left no mark of substance on his era.

Braudel's concept of la longue durée *has its origins less in a theory of history and more in a peculiarly French combination of nationalist hubris and nostalgia, coupled with shame over their non-performance in the Second World War.*

"Peasants and crops," the author assures us, "food supplies and the size of the population, silently determined the destiny of the age." With Braudel as editor, the *Annales* often expressed its scorn for the staples of the prewar discipline: political history, narrative, and episodic history. Under his influence, typical articles published in the journal would be entitled "The History of Rain and Fine Weather," and "Amenorrhoea in Time of Famine: Seventeenth to Twentieth Century." Part of the package that comes with this view of how to write history is the notion that particular historic events are of little consequence since they cannot influence, but merely express, the great underlying forces that cause them. "Resounding events often take place in an instant," Braudel writes in *The Mediterranean*, "and are but manifestations of that larger destiny by which alone they can be explained." Similarly, the role of the individual in history is hardly worthy of notice:

> When I think of the individual, I am always inclined to see him imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand, fixed in a landscape in which the infinite perspectives of the long term, *la longue durée*, stretch into the distance both behind him and before. In historical analysis, as I see it, the long run always wins in the end. It indubitably limits both the freedom of the individual and even the role of chance.

This approach has won for Braudel an unmatched international reputation. He is widely claimed to be one of the century's great practitioners of his discipline, similarly praised even in Gallic-jealous Britain by conservative historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and radicals such as Gareth Stedman Jones. His journal, *Annales*, has been seriously described by some as "the greatest historical journal in the world," and his more enthusiastic academic reviewers have ranked him with Thucydides, Gibbon, Macaulay, and Burckhardt. These accolades have been showered despite the fact that Braudel himself has openly acknowledged that the origins of his approach derived from an experience that was anything but reputable.

Braudel's first major opus began in the 1920s as a graduate thesis on the diplomatic

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history of Phillip II's Mediterranean policy. He says he had the idea for the eventual book, and wrote the first draft of what was to become *The Mediterranean*, while held in a Nazi prisoner of war camp in Lübeck for most of the Second World War. During his "gloomy captivity," he wrote in *Annales* in 1958, he

> struggled a good deal to get away from a chronicle of those difficult years (1940–45). Rejecting events and the time in which events take place was a way of placing oneself to one side, sheltered, so as to get some sort of perspective, to be able to evaluate them better, and not wholly to believe in them.

The event he would have most liked to disbelieve was, of course, the fall of France in 1940. For the Frenchmen of his generation, this event, coupled with the German occupation of Paris without a shot being fired, plus the subsequent collaboration of France with the Nazi regime, was a source of humiliation and anguish.

The concept that most assisted Braudel to distance himself from these events was that of the "*longue durée*," the structuralist view of history. This is the time span over which he claims the historian can trace the destiny of a civilization, a structure that particular events are powerless to alter, and a broad enough perspective to exonerate men of responsibility for events such as the defeat and occupation of their country. Over the course of the *longue durée*, what did a transient event like the fall of France matter? In *The Identity of France*, Braudel writes that even while the collaborators of the Vichy regime were in power, he believed: "The real France, the France held in reserve, *la France profonde*, remained behind us. It would survive, it did survive . . . Ever since those days, I have never ceased to think of a France buried deep inside itself, within its own heart, a France flowing along the contours of its own age—long history, destined to continue, come what may." In other words, the concept of *la longue durée* has its origins less in a theory of history and more in a peculiarly French combination of nationalist hubris and nostalgia, coupled with shame over their non-performance in the Second World War.

While such an approach might endear him to his countrymen, it obviously does not explain Braudel's success outside France, especially among English-speaking historians whom one would have expected to be the least inclined to support the notion of *la France profonde*. His reputation came largely because he provided a model of how history could be modernized. In the wake of the war, historians were keen to bury the last vestiges of the Victorian emphasis on the heroic individual, especially the chauvinist accounts of imperial heroes like Clive of India or Gordon of Khartoum that had dominated school textbooks as late as the 1930s. Modernization also meant taking on board the work of the fast-growing field of economic history which had found that politics, especially in democratic societies, was more a matter of economic management than had previously been appreciated. Up to the 1960s, anthropology and sociology were still intellectually respectable and some historians felt their own work should be more integrated with these and other social sciences. Braudel showed them how all these aims could be pursued. One of Braudel's most enthusiastic fan clubs was formed by the generation of Marxists who came to prominence in the 1960s, especially in Britain.

While some of the older English Marxist historians, such as Edward Thompson, remained immune, enthusiasm for French ideas raged among Marxist students like a pandemic. Urged on by the most fashionable leftist journal of the day, the London-based *New Left Review*, the generation of Sixties student radicals struggled to incorporate structuralist themes and methods into their theses. Karl Marx himself was something of an ambiguous hero to the editors of *NLR*. Marx, as both historian and revolutionary activist, saw the need to keep some space in his theory for political activism to make a difference to the course of

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history. His well-known introduction to the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* emphasized the constraints of history and the limitations on free action but stopped short of full-blown determinism. "Men make their own history," he wrote, "but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted." The academic Left of the 1960s, however, preferred Braudel's insistence on the irrelevance of individual action. An editor of *NLR* Perry Anderson wrote *Lineages of the Absolutist State* to press the argument for a determinist approach. By the 1970s his journal was the most ardent advocate of the structuralist brand of Marxism developed by the French Communist Party theorist Louis Althusser. To Althusser, individual men and women have no part in shaping their world. They are merely the bearers of roles that are defined for them by the "social formation," little more than robots programmed by the prevailing capitalist ideology. Though not a Marxist himself, Braudel nonetheless endorsed precisely the theory of history his New Left supporters wanted to hear. "Men do not make history," he wrote in the final passage of *The Identity of France*, "rather it is history above all that makes men and absolves them of blame."

In the wake of the failure of the attempted student revolutionary movement of 1968, and the attendant recall of Charles de Gaulle and election of Richard Nixon, this kind of historical determinism became a comfort blanket for the academic Left. There was no longer any need for a radical to be politically active since activism could make no difference to the great determining structures. All that remained was to study, theorize, and debate the nature of the structures themselves. This was an agenda perfectly suited to the academic world of seminars, conferences, cafes, and bars, and to the careers, tenure, and promotions that have focused their minds ever since.

By the 1980s, the tenured radicals had dropped Marx and Althusser (the latter now an embarrassment since in 1980 he had strangled his seventy-four-year-old wife and been declared insane) but retained their structuralist baggage. Many looked to alternative gurus, notably the former French Marxists Jean Baudrillard and Jean François Lyotard, who preached postmodernism and spoke of "the end of history." Others turned to Friedrich Nietzsche and the French Nietzschean historian Michel Foucault, who assured them history was no better than a "fictional discourse." "I am well aware," Foucault said, "that I have never written anything but fictions."

There are very few academic historians outside France, however, who are happy about characterizing what they do as writing fiction. Though Foucault still sets much of the agenda for the topics that graduate students research in the 1990s—the study of deviants, criminals, the insane, the sick, and other so-called marginalized minorities—most English-speaking historians are reluctant to openly accept the radical consequences of his views. Nonetheless, since the 1940s, as structuralism and determinism

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have risen to methodological prominence, a parallel and entirely complementary movement has grown to dominate the debate over the epistemological status of the writing of history. There is a genteel expression of just this point of view in Fernández-Armesto's *Millennium*. "History is a creative art," he says, "best produced with an imagination disciplined by knowledge of and

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respect for the sources." But he goes on: "To me the test of a good history book is not so much whether the past is verifiably 'reconstructed' and cogently expounded as whether it is convincingly imagined and vividly evoked." Few readers today would question such a declaration. It pays homage to the need for the historian to do more than a novelist and to go out and research the sources. But it also emphasizes, especially through the quotation marks around "reconstructed," that it is not trying to tell what really happened in the past. In short, it is ruling out the notion that the historian can get to the truth of the matter.

There has been a long debate between historians about whether the pursuit of the truth is their ultimate objective. In the nineteenth century, the German historian Leopold von Ranke tried to lay down the methodology for "scientific history," arguing that meticulous pursuit of sources would produce facts that themselves would be the building blocks of conclusions with which the historian could establish the truth about what really happened. Above all, Ranke contended, the historian should avoid imposing his own values, judgments, and biases onto the past he studies. In the last thirty years, Ranke's views have continued to be taught in university courses in historical method, but he has functioned primarily as a straw man to show the folly of the attempt to "reconstruct" the past.

Ranke's critics have argued that he is wrong for three reasons. First, there is no single truth about history to be uncovered. There are many perspectives on the past and we can never encompass them all. Different peoples and eras ask different questions about the past and, just when we think an issue has been settled, a new work can raise a fresh point of view. Second, even the scientific historian has to be selective, to choose some evidence to make his point and to reject others, since he can never attempt to write up everything he finds in his research, let alone everything that happened in the period he is covering. So there must be values or bias built into everything he writes. Third, those academics who have written in the Rankean mold are notorious for being boring and soporific. Their focus on getting their facts meticulously right has been at the expense of recreating the grand sweep of the movement of history that less fussy, more literary writers like Gibbon, Macaulay, and Michelet managed to achieve.

It would not be difficult for most readers of academic history texts to concede, indeed, to strongly endorse, the last of these points, though with all due respect to M. Braudel's lofty reputation, his own work, so devoid of personalities with whom the reader can identify or focus upon, surely ranks as among the most boring of them all. The other two critiques, however, have become so familiar they deserve more consideration. The Dutch historian Peter Geyl emerged in the postwar academic world as one of the most widely read commentators on the discipline. In particular, his books *Napoleon: For and Against* (1949) and *Debates with Historians* (1955) were influential in establishing in the postwar mind the notion that there could be no final truths in history. On Napoleon, he argued, history could "reach no unchallengeable conclusions on so many sided a character." Moreover, "to expect from history those final conclusions which may perhaps be obtained in other disciplines is to misunderstand its nature." Examining the way Napoleon had been represented by historians over the previous century, Geyl argued that different periods sought out and found their own facts and made their own judgments. He argued that this process would always occur and so each generation would always write its own history from the perspective of the political and intellectual environment of its own time and place. Geyl extended this relativist position even to the Germans who had interned him in Buchenwald during the war. He was critical of attempts by historians in the 1950s to trace the origins and pioneers of National Socialism:

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> If we are tempted by our horror at the culmination of evil that we have just experienced or witnessed to pick out in the past of Germany all the evil potentialities, we may construct an impressively cogent concatenation of causes and effects leading straight up to that crisis. But the impressiveness and the straightness will be of our own constructing. What we are really doing is to interpret the past in the terms of our own fleeting moment.

Geyl is here discussing not Nazism itself but its possible causes. He remains certain that the Nazi phenomenon itself was "evil." Little did he suspect that his own relativist argument would one day be used to question that very assessment.

In 1961, Geyl's book on Napoleon was favorably acknowledged by the English historian E. H. Carr, author of *What Is History?*, one of the most influential commentaries on history writing ever published. It was a required text in virtually every course on historical method in the English-speaking academic world for the next twenty years. There would be very few of the current generation of practicing historians who have not read it. Carr repeats Geyl's argument that history is "an unending dialogue between the present and the past." Different ages take different perspectives. The best we can hope for is a continuous debate. While he says that historians should base their writing on facts, the real stuff of history is not truth but interpretation. On any topic, he argues, there are an infinite number of facts from which the historian selects. "By and large," Carr says, "the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation." He went on: "If standing Sir George Clark on his head, I were to call history 'a hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts', my statement would, no doubt, be one-sided and misleading, but no more so, I venture to think, than the original dictum."

Carr was the author of a massive ten-volume study of the foundation of the USSR between 1917 and 1929 but, until his death in 1982, had remained a closet Marxist. He was only outed in 1987 by the editor of a revised edition of his book on method. His Marxism, however, was of the Old Left variety, and he saw some room for the individual to influence the course of history.

By the 1980s, the tenured radicals had dropped Marx and Althusser but retained their structuralist baggage. Many looked to alternative gurus, notably the former French Marxists Jean Baudrillard and Jean François Lyotard, who preached postmodernism and spoke of "the end of history."

In his oft-cited discussion of "society and the individual" in *What Is History?*, Carr says the ability to change history was confined to a highly select few, namely revolutionaries like Cromwell and Lenin who, he says, "helped mould the forces which carried them to greatness." Lesser mortals, even those as powerful as Napoleon and Bismarck, only "rode to greatness on the back of already existing forces." Despite this minor concession to the prospect that men might make their own history, Carr's legacy was to shore up both sides of the emerging consensus about the nature of the discipline. On the one hand, he gave barely qualified support to the structuralist notion that underlying forces were driving the historical process; on the other hand, he became the most eloquent spokesman for the relativist position that each generation, indeed any group of people with a unified perspective, could produce their own version of what they found in the past.

This legacy is alive and well today, not only in grand surveys like that of Fernández-Armesto, but in the common, day-to-day discussion and debate that goes on

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within the discipline, even among those with no connection to the politics that Carr spent his life supporting. One of the consequences of the relativist position is that it cedes some degree of credibility to anyone with an even vaguely coherent perspective, no matter how vile it might be. This is precisely what is happening today in debate about the Holocaust of the Second World War. A combination of neo-Nazi sympathizers and anti-Semitic skeptics are now claiming either that there was no deliberate plan to exterminate the Jews or else that the number of deaths and the German responsibility for them have been greatly exaggerated. This has reached the stage where Professor Deborah Lipstadt has felt compelled to write *Denying the Holocaust* to rebut the claims. The problem for historians who accept the epistemology of Geyl and Carr is that they lack any firm ground upon which to stand to undertake the same job.

In *The New York Review of Books* of September 19, 1996, there is a review by Gordon A. Craig of a new book on Joseph Goebbels by the English Nazi sympathizer and Holocaust denier David Irving. Craig wrote:

> It is always difficult for the non-historian to remember that there is nothing absolute about historical truth. What we consider as such is only an estimation, based upon what the best available evidence tells us. It must constantly be tested against new information and new interpretations, however implausible they may be, or else it will lose its vitality and degenerate into dogma or shibboleth. Such people as David Irving, then, have an indispensable part in the historical enterprise, and we dare not disregard their views.

Now, Gordon Craig is a well-respected historian of modern Germany, a former president of the American Historical Association and no supporter of the line on the Holocaust pushed by Irving and his ilk. After the above opening, Craig's *NYRB* article goes on to argue against much of the interpretation offered by Irving's book. However, someone operating with Craig's epistemology—history produces no absolute truths—is in a very weak position to do this. He cannot *refute* Irving. The best he can do is *dispute* him. The consequence of the position that there can be no absolute truths is that there can be no absolute falsehoods either, so refutation ("prove the falsehood of") is beyond reach. Craig may well be able to deploy many effective arguments against Irving but, while he retains his epistemological position, he leaves his opponent and all the other Holocaust deniers a window of credibility.

Yet there is no need to concede them this status at all. Far from being impossible, historical truth is not a difficult concept, especially with an issue as recent and as well-recorded as the Holocaust. The sources for the vast majority of independent evidence we have about this event—perpetrators as well as victims, survivors, and witnesses—corroborate each other. For every corroboration, there increases in geometric proportion the probability that this event actually occurred. Since we live in a finite world, there comes a point where it is impossible for any scenario to exist in which the Holocaust did not occur. This remains true no matter how many particular or less generalized aspects of the event—the total numbers involved, whether Hitler personally ordered it, etc.—remain uncertain. The proposition that the event known as the Holocaust took place is an absolute historical truth. Let me give a different example to underline this point. Another contender for historical truth might be the proposition: "The United States defeated Japan in the Second World War." Now this is something that we know not simply from the historical record. It is no mere interpretation derived from an examination of the documents of surrender signed aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* in Tokyo Harbor in 1945. It is not an interpretation that future generations might overturn after they have scoured the nuances of the texts for so far undiscerned ideological meaning. The fact that the United States defeated Japan has

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shaped the very world that all of us have inhabited since 1945. The relations between states, the world economy, the employment market of every industrial country are all consequences in various ways of this historical truth. The world itself confirms the proposition.

Of course, E. H. Carr might argue the defeat of Japan is a mere "fact" and the really interesting discussions are the interpretations historians make and the conclusions they draw from facts of this kind. Well, one man's fact can be another man's conclusion. For someone writing a narrative history of the war in the Pacific, the defeat of Japan is a very big conclusion indeed.

One of the consequences of the relativist position is that it cedes some degree of credibility to anyone with an even vaguely coherent perspective, no matter how vile it might be.

There is no event that is inherently confined to the status of a mere fact, that is, a building block of a much larger conclusion. Every fact can itself be a conclusion and every conclusion can itself be a fact in someone else's explanation.

All this is not to argue that history has to be confined forever, in a Rankean sense, only to facts that have been conclusively proven to be true. History is not only a science, it is an art and, moreover, it often deals in value judgments. Historians frequently offer interpretations that they know, because of the limitations of the available evidence, will forever remain interpretations and bones of contention. There are some historical questions that will probably never be answered to everyone's satisfaction—the causes of the industrial revolution in Britain, for instance, is a likely recent contender. Many of these latter questions, it should be openly admitted, are among the most interesting interrogations we can make of the past. But the existence of uncertainty and the necessity of value judgments, even on a wide scale, remain perfectly compatible with our ability to establish certainty in some, indeed a great many, cases. The argument from Peter Geyl—some historical interpretations are transient, therefore all historical findings are questionable, therefore history is necessarily unreliable—is nothing more than an invalid inference. When one of its consequences is the irrefutability of a Nazi sympathizer's denial of the Holocaust, decency as well as logic demands that it now be abandoned. In defending the ability of historians to get to the truth of the matter, or at least of some matters, I am referring to the traditional, empirically grounded practice of historians rather than to those speculative works that claim to find some great underlying force—be it geography, ideology, or the imperative of the class struggle—driving the historical process. History is an invention of Western culture, dating from ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C., and since then its practice has been confined almost entirely to the West. No other culture has produced, or been able to live with, the notion that it is possible to examine the passage of social affairs in a way that is independent of both the prevailing religion and the prevailing political system.

Yet for all this time, there have been two traditions of history contesting the field. One derives from the first genuine historian, Thucydides. Other ancient Greek works of his era have used the term "history," but it was Thucydides in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written some time between 424 and 400 B.C., who rejected reliance on sacred texts, myth, legend, and rumor and adopted a strictly empirical research method. "Of the events of war," he wrote, "I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own. I have described nothing but what I saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular enquiry." That other

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pillar of Western culture, the Judeo-Christian tradition, played an essential role in preserving and nourishing the historiographic impulse. In the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (1990), John McManners has argued that in the implications of Christian belief there are encouragements to writing history in an austere, uncommitted fashion, with wide cultural concern:

> Firstly, there was the conviction that everything men do or think matters intensely and eternally, as coming under the judgement of God; secondly, there was the concept of a creator entirely distinct from his creation, ruling the universe by general laws, whose ways are inscrutable, and who gives men the gift of freedom. Hence the obligation to treat seriously and with reverence all men and the social orders they build, to study everything, to explain without partisanship, insisting on the logical coherence of all things.

From the fall of Rome to the Renaissance, the idea of history was kept alive in the industry of those many Christian monks whose chronicles of church and state were imbued with ideals of this kind.

Christianity, however, bore an additional dimension that in the last two centuries has produced a second tradition within history. Christianity has held that, while the achievements of man are due to his own will and intellect, they are also beholden to something other than himself, the realizing of God's purposes for man. From this perspective, men are the vehicles through which history occurs but history has a direction and a purpose decided by a force beyond man. This Christian concept of history also contained the idea of fulfillment. The purpose of history would one day be realized in the salvation of mankind at the Last Judgment. History is thus a teleological process with a purpose and an end. It is this second aspect of the Christian tradition that has formed the basis of those theories of history that conjure up great impersonal forces and undercurrents which purportedly determine the destiny of mankind.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel secularized the theory, substituting "reason" for God's will. The object of history for Hegel was the realization of reason's purpose of creating a just and free society. Hegel thought this had occurred at the Battle of Jena in 1806 when Napoleon defeated the *ancien régime* of Germany and cleared the way for the establishment of the French Revolutionary principles of liberty and equality. Forty years later, Karl Marx modified Hegel to argue that the underlying force of history was the class struggle, which was driving human society to ever higher stages of development, of which the final plane would be Communist society.

Given the track record of Hegel and Marx and the manifest failure of both to correctly identify anything remotely resembling the fulfillment of history, the teleological aspect of their approach is, not surprisingly, out of favor in the late twentieth century. Only the more loony postmodernists like Jean Baudrillard and the lone Hegelian voice of Francis Fukuyama talk about the "end of history" today. But there are still plenty of theorists who support an otherwise very similar "great impersonal forces" approach. Fernand Braudel and his imitators like Felipe Fernández-Armesto are merely the latest in this same tradition, only with one important difference. The Christian theologians such as St. Augustine who developed the original version knew that it depended on a powerful force to act as the engine of history, in their case God. Hegel and Marx recognized something similar. Though their concepts of reason and class struggle were secular, and generated from within mankind itself, they still functioned as theoretical engines, driving everything along and bringing new stages of history into being. But the Braudel brand of structuralism has no such driving force. Geography, climate, and topography do not constitute great underlying currents for mankind. All they can possibly be are part of the external framework within which events occur. At most, they might place

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some limitations on human action. But by no stretch of the metaphorical imagination can geography ever be said to be responsible for the "destiny" and the "fate" of mankind, as Braudel claims. His concept of

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destiny and fate requires some kind of powerful causative agent that can defy the best effort of mankind's will and intellect, and can bend human outcomes to its purpose. In the *Annales* school and the other varieties of French structuralism, such an agent is precisely what is missing.

All such theories about "underlying forces" also fall prey to the old logical positivist critique of metaphysics. The forces are taken as given; people shaped by them are unaware of their presence; they can only be detected by the imagination of a great scholar taking a long view of things. Their existence is not dependent upon any evidence that can be verified or falsified; or rather, if there is evidence that appears to question them it is the evidence that needs to be explained away, not the forces. To believe in phenomena like the "cunning of reason," the class struggle, or *la longue durée* is to take a leap of faith. It is to treat works of history that endorse them not as the products of evidence and reason but as sacred texts, handed down by authority and to be learned but not questioned by the faithful.

One of the reasons for the esteem the *Annales* school enjoyed in France in the postwar period was that it not only relegated the fall of France to the status of a minor eddy in the grand stream of French history, but it did the same to the Revolution of 1789. Ever since the fall of Napoleon, French society and politics has been racked by division over the Revolution. One of the major polarizations in the Third Republic as late as the 1930s was between supporters of the "revolutionaries" and those of the "counterrevolutionaries." After the war, this debilitating conflict was widely identified as one of the causes of France's defeat. It was not surprising, then, that a movement bent on relegating political history to a position of small importance would be welcomed as a means of fostering national harmony. By the 1980s, however, the consequences were causing alarm among French political leaders, especially after a 1983 survey found that only one-third of children entering secondary school could give the date of the French Revolution. While some English-speaking countries might regard this as a comparatively high rate of political awareness, French President François Mitterand declared the "deficiency of teaching history" to be "a national danger."

In her 1987 collection of essays, *The New History and the Old*, the American historian Gertrude Himmelfarb noted Mitterand's concern and observed that similar tendencies had been evident in the U.S. education system ever since social history, "total history," and "history from below" had come to dominate the curriculum at the expense of political history. She argues that balance needs to be restored, especially since political history is an exercise in two kinds of human reason: that reflected in the rational ordering of society by means of laws, constitutions, and political institutions, and that of the rational activity of the historian seeking to discover and to transmit the truth about society. Himmelfarb's essays constitute the most eloquent and persuasive recent defense of the first of the Western historical traditions described above, that deriving from Thucydides and the medieval monastic chroniclers. Rather than human affairs being impelled by great impersonal forces, political history reveals

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our world to be made by men and, instead of being "absolved of blame," men are responsible for the consequences of their actions. This was the very point that informed Thucydides' study of the Peloponnesian War: the fate of Athens had been determined not by prophets, oracles, or the gods, but by human actions and social organization. Himmelfarb says good history demonstrates Aristotle's claim that "man is by nature a political animal." It is not in the "household" or the "village" but only in the "polis," Aristotle said, that man is truly human and decisively different to other gregarious animals. What these animals lack is a polity, "a government of laws and institutions by means of which —and only by means of which, Aristotle believed—man consciously, rationally tries to establish a just regime and pursue the good life."

Hence, the demise of political history in recent decades and the rise of the various impersonal theories that deny men are agents of their own fate lead not only to the kind of bizarre judgment that would make China rather than Western Europe and its offshoots the leading force of this past millennium. It also involves, Himmelfarb argues, a radical redefinition of human nature, by which we

> lose not only the unifying theme that has given coherence to history, not only the notable events, individuals and institutions that have constituted our historical memory and our heritage, not only the narrative that has made history readable and memorable—not only, in short, a meaningful past—but also a conception of man as a rational, political animal.

Himmelfarb wisely observes that orthodoxies usually breed heretics. This is true, but the nonconformists who today see the need for a reformation to restore the traditional practice of history remain a minority in terms of both numbers and reputation. With this in mind, and with little optimism about any rapid reversal of the status quo, let me finish by advocating a course of action suggested by one of the theologians of the present orthodoxy, Peter Geyl. In the days when his own views appeared a tantalizing heresy, he got at least one thing right: "Criticism is the first duty of historical scholarship," he declared, "criticism, again criticism, and criticism once more."

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Elegance in mourning: Georges Braque in London

by Hilton Kramer

Braque is occupied with quality, and finds salvation in a delicate and exquisite economy of means. Such learned execution confers a sort of magical interest on whatever he touches.
—Walter Sickert, 1924

I like the rule that corrects the emotion.
—Georges Braque, 1917

There are times when one despairs of the London art scene. The English seem to have such a voracious appetite for everything in art except serious painting. It's not as if nothing has changed since Henry James, writing about an exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1878, took note of the vulgarity, triviality, and what he called "that singular goodiness" that characterized so many of the works to be seen there. What has changed, however, is that the Victorian taste for "that singular goodiness" has now been supplanted by a contemporary taste for the disagreeable and the disgusting. Hence the extravagant praise and patronage for the likes of Gilbert and George, Damien Hirst, and the Chapman brothers, not to mention Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. What hasn't changed is, as James also wrote on that occasion, "that the plastic quality is not what English spectators look for in a picture, or what the artist has taken the precaution of putting into it." What is wanted instead, as James observed, are pictures that "tell a story or preach a sermon." The stories are now of a different sort, with that "singular goodiness" having yielded to a *nostalgie de la boue*, but the vulgarities and sentimentalities remain in place as an abiding cultural disposition.

On the other hand, it is in London at the moment—and not in New York—that you can see an exhibition of "Braque: The Late Works."[1] For anyone with a keen interest in what James called "the plastic quality" in painting, Georges Braque (1882–1963) is an undeniable master. He is not, however, the kind of master that is very much in vogue nowadays on either side of the Atlantic. He was never political, preferring to steep himself in the quiet mysteries and ambiguities of poetry than to participate in the raucous world of public affairs. His private life was also not the sort that lends itself to publicity or mythification. He had but one wife, to whom he remained devoted, and in other respects, too, his "story" was steadfastly resistant to scandal or public notice of any sort. Except for the serious wounds he incurred as a soldier in the French army in the

1 "Braque: The Late Works" opened at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, on January 23, 1997, and remains on view through April 6. The exhibition will reopen at the Menil Collection, Houston, on April 25, 1997, and remain on view through August 31. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by John Golding, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, and Sophie Bowness, has been published by the Royal Academy of Arts and Yale University Press (141 pages, $40).

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First World War, the principal events of Braque's life were largely confined to his studio. In the later decades of his long career, it was indeed the studio that often served as the dominant "subject" of his art. It is not out of such undramatic materials that myths of the modern artist can be easily generated, and in Braque's case none ever were.

No doubt it is the absence of such a myth that accounts for the generally lackluster and sometimes obtuse response that "Braque: The Late Works" has met with in the London press. None of the other reviews I saw was quite as hopelessly stupid as John McEwen's in *The Sunday Telegraph*, which dismissed the exhibition as the work of "Mrs. Picasso," but even the mildly approving notices failed to evince any real feeling for or understanding of the work on view. Without any showy display of sex, politics, scandal, or a *frisson nouveau* of any sort, the deeply pondered paintings of Braque's last years were treated as the routine performance of an artist whose work could no longer be expected to interest the jaded tastes of the 1990s.

That reference to "Mrs. Picasso" in *The Sunday Telegraph* was, I suppose, one of the keys to this response. If such a remark means anything at all, it means that Braque's place in the canon of modern painting is presumed to have been exhausted when his celebrated collaboration with Picasso in the creation of Cubism was completed on the eve of the First World War. Yet even if we ignore for the moment some of the great pictures that Braque produced between the two world wars, this is not a view of his achievement that is seriously sustainable in the presence of "Braque: The Late Works," which concentrates on the paintings the artist created during the Second World War and in the years that followed.

In this exhibition, we are reminded—among much else—that in the masterpieces of his late work Braque was a far greater painter than Picasso was in his. If we compare some of the late works recently seen in the "Picasso and Portraiture" exhibition in New York with the "Atelier" and "Billiard Table" paintings in "Braque: The Late Works," it is certainly Braque and not Picasso who is seen to have kept faith with the artistic standard set in the early Cubist paintings. To appreciate the difference, however, you have to be more interested in "the plastic quality" of the painting than in the myth of the artist's life.

Braque was nearly sixty years old when France fell to the German army in 1940. "Not surprisingly," writes John Golding in the catalogue accompanying the London exhibition, "Braque produced little in 1940, but in 1941 he resumed work," and the pictures he produced in the war years tend, as Mr. Golding also writes, "to be austere, at times even tragic in their implications." Neither this affinity for austerity nor his feeling for tragedy was ever again to be absent from Braque's painting, and some of the paintings he produced after the war are, if anything, even more somber than his wartime pictures. What is never absent is the painter's natural elegance—that gift of execution which, as Walter Sickert once wrote, "confers a sort of magical interest on whatever he touches." But in the late works Braque's elegance goes into mourning, so to speak, for a world that has been lost. What is gone is the sheer sumptuousness that characterized so many of the masterpieces produced between the wars, and in its place is an enduring accent of elegy.

The first of the late pictorial elegies that we encounter in the London exhibition is *The Large Interior with Palette*, or *Grand Intérieur*, of 1942. Mr. Golding calls it "the greatest of all Braque's wartime canvases," and speaks of "Braque's unique ability to extract every nuance out of an essentially tonal palette of blacks, grays and fawns"—a palette that, with occasional recourse to more emphatic color, would continue to define his self-imposed regimen of pictorial austerity in the series of "Billiard Table" and "Atelier" interiors in the postwar years.

In none of these paintings are we given anything like a realistic account of Braque's

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actual studio, of course. All are inventions of an imaginary secluded pictorial space in which the objects of the painter's vocation are no sooner evoked than they dissolve into the spectral transparency of a nocturnal dream. Despite the multiplicity of objects to be glimpsed in these paintings, everything proves in the end to be illusory but the picture's elaborately invented space and the somber poetic emotion it is created to convey.

It is not the least of Braque's artistic audacities in these paintings that he was able to appropriate the conventions of the studio interior and the studio still life for the purpose of transforming them into the vehicle of an elegiac fantasy. There are few traces of the human figure in these paintings, and where such traces survive they are no more lifelike than the dissolving objects that crowd them for our attention. "Braque undoubtedly preferred objects to figures," writes Isabelle Monod-Fontaine in another of the essays for the catalogue of the exhibition, and then adds: "but he was possibly even more attached to the representation of the spaces between objects." That is surely another key to the "reading" of these elegiac canvases, and to the emotions they encompass. So is Madame Monod-Fontaine's admonition that these paintings "do not reveal themselves at first glance, they need time and attention . . . they appear dark, hermetic and just as difficult to decipher as the analytical Cubist paintings of 1911–12." As a consequence of this hermeticism, she finds in these pictures "a disconcerting capacity to elude the gaze," but this, I have found, is a temporary obstacle that is easily overcome with sufficient time and attention. She also reminds us that the French are no more responsive to this work than I found the London critics to be: "it is smart in France," she writes, "to gloss over the work that is the focus of this exhibition, the paintings of [Braque's] last twenty years."

Without glossing over anything in the exhibition, however, I have to confess that there is one group of pictures in "The Late Works" exhibition that continues to elude me—the group that Mr. Golding describes as "the final, valedictory 'Bird' paintings" that succeed the "Billiard Table" and "Atelier" series. In these pictures, it is not their hermeticism that I find to be problematic but just the opposite: their unwonted simplification and vacancy. It was inevitable, perhaps, that Braque would sooner or later seek to liberate himself from the cloistral, constricted space of the studio interiors before he put down his brushes forever, and there is no mistaking the fact that those final "Bird" paintings signified something of great importance to him. But whatever they may have signified for Braque, they strike me as an indulgence—an escape from the discipline and complexity that governed his greatest work. "I like the rule that corrects the emotion," Braque famously said of his attitude toward art, and in the "Bird" paintings the emotion seems to have slipped the tether of whatever "rule" may have permitted him to carry his feeling to its requisite realization.

Far more successful, I think, and far more surprising, too, are the small, dour landscapes of those last years. These are the most melancholy paintings that Braque ever produced—imaginary pictures of familiar earthly sites that announce their author's imminent departure from the world of earthly cares. Even more simplified in their formal conception than the simplest of the "Bird" paintings, they are irresistible in their sadness and their authenticity. Braque had begun his career as a landscape painter, and it was to these paintings of barren ground and unearthly light that he turned his talents in the end.

It will always be to the studio interiors and still lifes that we shall return in studying the late work of this remarkable artist. "People don't take sufficiently into account the dark forces that impel us," Braque observed in 1939, and the masterpieces he produced during the war and the postwar years are meditations on his experience of those "dark forces" in the waning years of his life. It is no longer in relation to Picasso

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that these paintings are now to be seen, but in the company of Alberto Giacometti and Samuel Beckett, especially the Beckett of *Waiting for Godot*, who, in the face of those "dark forces," found themselves obliged to create an art appropriate to a world resistant to fixity and settled definition.

Braque had always brought a greater sense of gravity to his art than he was generally given credit for, and in another of the texts for the excellent catalogue of the London exhibition—Sophie Bowness's fine essay on "Braque and the Poets"—we are given a salutary reminder of the extent to which the art of poetry shaped his thinking about art in these last decades of his career. The youngest of the poets whom Braque was drawn to in the postwar years was René Char, twenty-five years his junior, and in Ms. Bowness's account of their collaborative projects we are given a better idea of the sensibility that Braque brought to his art in this period than is usually given to us in critical assessments of the paintings.

"Char's aphoristic style and taste for concision were shared by the painter," Ms. Bowness writes.

> Char admired Braque's reflections on art, copying extracts from a *Cahier* at Braque's home in 1948. Both loved the fragmentary, aphoristic writings of Heraclitus, and they collaborated on an edition of them in 1948, Braque contributing an etching and Char a preface. Both were also interested in the poetry of Pindar, and to *Le ruisseau de blé* (1960) Char contributed a translation and Braque an engraving.

There are indeed times when one despairs of the London art scene, but then it produces something like "Braque: The Late Works" and its fine catalogue, and we are reminded of how indispensable to the life of art London still is for us.

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Who was David Stove?

by Roger Kimball

For two hundred years we had sawed and sawed and sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen, our efforts were rewarded, and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake. The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses after all, it was a cesspool full of barbed wire.
—George Orwell, 1940

It's possible that I shall make an ass of myself. But in that case one can always get out of it with a little dialectic. I have, of course, so worded my proposition as to be right either way.
—Karl Marx, in a letter to Engels, 1857

I shall doubtless look back on the second half of 1996 as my period Down Under. Last summer, rummaging through a pile of books destined for the used bookstore, I chanced upon *The Killing of History* by the Australian historian Keith Windschuttle.[1] This devastating anatomy of what has gone wrong in the teaching and writing of history is a masterpiece of scholarly polemic. Moving relentlessly through the sundry intellectual and political corruptions that have disfigured contemporary academic historiography, Mr. Windschuttle makes good on the promise of his dramatic subtitle and explains, in riveting detail, "How a Discipline Is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists." One of my chief debts to Mr. Windschuttle's book is the discovery of the work of his late compatriot, the philosopher David Stove. In a section of his book dealing with the vogue of relativism in the history and philosophy of science, Mr. Windschuttle relies heavily on Stove's book *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists*.[2] Impressed by the snippets that Mr. Windschuttle quoted—and by the arguments that he recapitulated—I scared up a copy of the book. It was a revelation. With a combination of dazzling philosophical acumen and scarifying wit, Stove does for irrationalism in Karl Popper's philosophy of science (and that of such heirs as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend) what the Romans did for Carthage in the Third Punic War: he assaults and destroys it utterly. It had been a long time since I had read a book of philosophy as entertaining and illuminating as *Popper and After*. An Australian friend to whom I mentioned my enthusiasm recommended *Darwinian Fairytales*, Stove's posthumously published attack on the absurdities of Darwinism, especially as it was applied to human beings.[3] I found *Darwinian Fairytales* every bit as absorbing

1 See my article on *The Killing of History* in the September 1996 issue of *The New Criterion*.

2 Originally published in 1982 by Pergamon Press, a new edition of this book is forthcoming from Macleay Press under the title *Anything Goes: Origins of the Cult of Scientific Irrationalism*.

3 *Darwinian Fairytales*, by David Stove; Avebury, 225 pages, $72.95.

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as *Popper and After*: an invigorating blend of analytic lucidity, mordant humor, and an amount of common sense too great to be called "common." Once I started it, I could hardly put it down. But who, I wondered, was David Stove? How had his work escaped me all these years?

A few inquiries revealed that Stove's work had a kind of underground following. *Popper and After*, especially, enjoys a high reputation among a small but fervent group of admirers. *The Plato Cult*, seven essays attacking philosophical idealism wherever Stove happened to find it, made something of a stir when it appeared in 1991.[4] But David Stove never achieved much public recognition, not outside Australia anyway. I believe this was partly because his non-technical work, some of which might have developed a popular following, tended to be published by exceedingly obscure houses. No doubt it was also partly by design: intellectually, Stove was the opposite of clubbable. And then there was the matter of his opinions, which flew in the face of just about every intellectual cliché going, from relativism and irrationalism on one side to doctrinaire Darwinism on the other.

Stove spent most of his career teaching philosophy at the University of Sydney. Disgusted by the mephitic winds of political correctness wafting through the Australian universities, he retired early, at the age of sixty, in 1988. He then devoted himself to writing and a variety of decorous private passions: music before Mozart, tending his rural property in New South Wales—and smoking. Being part of the anti-anti-smoking lobby myself, it saddens me to report that he died by his own hand in 1994 after a debilitating bout of throat cancer. He was sixty-six.

Obituaries by friends and colleagues all drew a similar picture. One described Stove as the Jonathan Swift of contemporary philosophy; another noted that, like David Hume (the philosopher he admired most), Stove "delighted in finding objections"—even, it should be said, in Hume's philosophy. Who else would have organized a competition to find and publicize "the worst argument in the world"? (The winning submission, Stove explained, would be distinguished not only by its intrinsic awfulness but also by its degree of acceptance among philosophers and the extent to which it had escaped criticism.) It is not quite true that Stove was a "purely negative thinker," as he once said of himself. But he was at his best on the attack; he was, in fact, one of those writers from whom even praise was a kind of challenge. In his Introduction to a posthumous collection of essays enticingly called *Cricket Versus Republicanism*,[5] Stove's literary executor, James Franklin, gives a clue to his friend's sensibility in a (partial) summary of his dislikes. "The list of what he attacked," Mr. Franklin writes,

> was a long one, and included, but was certainly not limited to, Arts Faculties, big books, contraception, Darwinism, the Enlightenment, feminism, Freud, the idea of progress, leftish views of all kinds, Marx, . . . metaphysics, modern architecture and art, philosophical idealism, Popper, religion, semiotics, Stravinsky and Sweden. . . . Also, anything beginning with "soc" (even Socrates got a serve or two).

Of course, any crank could subscribe to such a list. The "Stove trick," as Mr. Franklin observes, "was to be against things for reasons one would not have thought of oneself." I will only add that Stove's reasons, more often than not, were as compelling as they were fresh. It may be easy to dislike some of Stove's views; it is generally much more difficult to dismiss them.

There are essentially three parts to Stove's *oeuvre*. Most of his technical philosophical

4 *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Essays*, by David Stove; Basil Blackwell, 209 pages, £40.

5 *Cricket Versus Republicanism and Other Essays*, by David Stove; Quakers Hill Press, 150 pages, $17.95 (Australian).

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work was on the so-called problem of induction—on the problem, that is to say, of how we can reason convincingly from the observed to the unobserved. He wrote two books on this subject, *Probability and Hume's Inductive Skepticism* (1973) and *Rationality of Induction* (1986). The second part of Stove's work consists in his full-scale assaults on scientific irrationalism (*Popper and After*), philosophical idealism (some essays in *The Plato Cult*), and certain aspects of Darwinism (*Darwinian Fairytales*). This is Stove at his best and most deadly, patiently dismantling intellectual absurdity piece by piece. Finally, Stove was an occasional essayist of considerable charm and polemical snap. Writing for such magazines as *The American Scholar* and *Commentary* in the United States, *Encounter* in England, and *Quadrant* in Australia, he expatiated about everything from English cottage gardens and the virtues of cricket (a game, he says, that "requires gentlemanliness, and teaches it") to feminism, racial antagonism, and John Stuart Mills's *On Liberty* ("How did an argument so easily answered ever impose itself upon intelligent people?"). Fans of the early birth-control proselytizers Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes will want to read "O Pioneers! . . ." to discover how repulsive these benefactresses of humanity were in life. When Stopes's second husband lost nearly all his money in the Depression, his wife lost no time in winkling him out of their beautiful eighteenth-century house and her life. "He was reduced to living alone in a single room in London," Stove comments, "where in due course he died. This saddened Marie, who wrote a little poem about it, deploring the housing shortage."

Stove is not always convincing. It seems peremptory, to say the least, to dismiss religion, as he does in "Idealism: A Victorian Horror-Story," as little more than a psychological "deprivation-effect"—especially since, as he puts it elsewhere, "not to understand religion is . . . not to understand nine-tenths of human history." (There is a lot to be said, however, for his description of Victorian idealism as "a sickening evasion, forever restoring religious consolation while pretending to take it away.") Similarly, his intolerance for balderdash sometimes led him drastically to undervalue the achievements of other philosophers. It is understandable that he should despise deliberately mystifying writers like Hegel and Heidegger—whatever their virtues, both were addicted to opacity. But it will hardly do to dismiss Plato ("that scourge of the human mind") and Kant (for example) as overrated poseurs. In such cases, Stove's impatience led him into caricature. "Plato's discovery," Stove writes, "went as follows":

> It is possible for something to be a certain way and for something else to be the same way.
> So
> There are universals.
> (*Tumultuous applause, which lasts, despite occasional subsidences, 2,400 years.*)

Amusing, yes; but perhaps not *quite* fair to the author of *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, and the *Republic*.

Stove was not usually so cavalier. But he clearly enjoyed tweaking the intellectual and moral complacencies of his readers. Consider the following paragraph, with which he opens "'Always Apologize, Always Explain': Robert Nozick's War Wounds," Stove's review of that Harvard philosopher's book *Philosophical Explanations*:

> An unprecedented expansion of communism took place immediately after the second world war. For the next twenty-odd years, any possibility of resistance to communist expansion depended almost entirely upon America: no other country possessed both the requisite military capacity and the willingness to use it. But the outcome of the Vietnam war showed that, while America's capacity for such resistance remained intact, her willingness did not. For that war was lost, not through defeat of American armies in the field, nor yet through treachery among them, but through a massive

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> sedition at home. The nation showed that it had become utterly opposed to any further armed resistance to communism.

All true, of course, but that wasn't the story one got from Jane Fonda, *The Nation*, *The New York Review of Books*, or professors of philosophy at Harvard University. Such a "revolution in national sentiment," Stove argues, could not help but be reflected in intellectual life. He examines as exhibit number one Nozick's call for a "non-coercive philosophy."

> The completeness of Nozick's composition is remarkable: he touches somewhere in the book, however lightly, almost every note of American decadence. Gandhi is there. The necessary deference to feminism is there. The necessary reproof to "racism" is there. Carlos Castaneda is there, referred to as though he were a thinker, which he is not. . . . Drugs of course are there, and in no unfavorable light: drugs may have their place, Nozick thinks, in "the treatment for philosophical parochialism." Has he left anything out? Is there anyone in post-Vietnam America who needs to be placated, whom he has not placated? This was obviously a worry, and there is a nervous catch-all reference to "children's rights, the treatment of animals, domination and ecological awareness."

Nozick looked forward to a new version of philosophy that would replace *arguments* with a kinder, gentler alternative—*explanations*—because arguments, after all, attempt "to get someone to believe something, whether he wants to believe it or not." Stove is withering about all this, noting among other things that "no ideal could be more destructive of human life than the ideal of non-coerciveness." The only way, he writes, "of producing a non-coercive human being is to produce an autistic one. But then, autism is really the conclusion to which Nozick's conception of philosophy tends, just as it is the conclusion to which American foreign policy in the same period has tended."

There is something to offend nearly everyone in Stove's essays. One can imagine the reaction of his colleagues at the University of Sydney when, in 1986, he published "A Farewell to the Arts: Marxism, Semiotics, and Feminism." This bombshell began: "The Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney is a disaster-area, and not of the merely passive kind, like a bombed building, or an area that has been flooded. It is the active kind, like a badly-leaking nuclear reactor, or an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle." Stove went on to quote from, and ridicule, the work of several of his colleagues. He cheerfully identified each by name, concluding that intellectually, "the sum of Marxism, semiotics and feminism is o + o + o = o." Again, he is quite right about this, but such observations are not a balm to collegiality. It was around that time that university administrators spoke of bringing nebulous "disciplinary proceedings" against Stove. In the end, nothing happened, but one imagines that the threat must have hardened his resolve and possibly hastened his departure from academic life.

He probably would have had to leave soon anyway. There are few universities in the United States, at any rate, at which Stove's life would have been easy after he got around to writing "The Intellectual Capacity of Women" and "Racial and Other Antagonisms," both of which appear in *Cricket Versus Republicanism*. "I believe that the intellectual capacity of women is on the whole inferior to that of men," Stove wrote in the former essay, giving as his "main reason" for this belief the uncomfortable observation that "the intellectual *performance* of women is inferior to men." In other words, he explains, it is the same sort of reasoning as that which convinces us that "Fords are on the whole inferior to Mercedes; or as that which convinces dog-fanciers that Irish setters are not as smart as labradors; or as that which convinces everyone that the intellectual capacity of seven-year-old children is on the whole inferior to that of nine-year-olds." Stove deals

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with all the usual objections—that women haven't been given sufficient opportunities, etc.—and concludes with an interesting thought experiment. Suppose that the historical evidence had been the reverse and that the intellectual performance of men had been "uniformly inferior, under the widest variety of circumstances, to that of women." Would "those people who are at present equality-theorists be as confident then as they are now of the equal intellectual capacity of the two sexes? To ask this question," Stove writes, "is to answer it. The fact is, our egalitarians treat evidence on a basis of heads-I-win-tails-you-lose."

Stove's essay "Racial and Other Antagonisms" is similarly emollient. He begins by noting that some degree of friction is the common if not the inevitable result when "two races of people have been in contact for long." Only in the twentieth century, however, has such antagonism been described as a form of "prejudice." Why? Earlier ages had the concept, and the word. Part of the reason, Stove suggests, is that by christening racial animosity "racial *prejudice*" we transform it into an intellectual fault, i.e., a false or irrational belief that might be cured by education—and this, Stove observes, "is a distinctly *cheering* thing to imply." Alas, while it is certainly true that racial antagonism is often *accompanied by* false or irrational beliefs about the other race, it is by no means clear that it *depends upon* them. And if it doesn't, education will be little more than liberal window dressing.

Stove's essay on race is full of discomfiting observations. He defines "racism"—a neologism so recent, he points out, that it was not in the OED in 1971—as the belief that "some human races are inferior to others in certain respects, and that it is sometimes proper to make such differences the basis of our behaviour towards people." Although this proposition is constantly declared to be false, Stove says, "everyone knows it is true, just as everyone knows it is true that people differ in age, sex, health, etc., and that it is sometimes proper to make *these* differences the basis of our behaviour towards them." For example,

> if you are recruiting potential basketball champions, you would be mad not to be more interested in American Negroes than in Vietnamese. . . . Any rational person, recruiting an army, will be more interested in Germans than in Italians. If what you want in people is aptitude for forming stable family-ties, you will prefer Italians or Chinese to American Negroes. Pronounced mathematical ability is more likely to occur in an Indian or a Hungarian than in an Australian Aboriginal. If you are recruiting workers, and you value docility above every other trait in a worker, you should prefer Chinese to white Americans. And so on.

Stove readily admitted that some of these traits may be culturally rather than genetically determined. But he went on to observe that "they are still traits which are *statistically associated with race*, well enough, to make race a rational guide in such areas of policy as recruitment or immigration." As I say, David Stove would not have been made to feel welcome at many American colleges or universities.

There is a certain amount of calculated outrage in Stove's polemical essays. Whatever the subject, he finds the tenderest spot of the most sensitive nerve; then he presses. At the very least, his arguments issue a challenge (as Kant might say) to the "dogmatic slumbers" of his readers. When he turns his attention to irrationalism about science or the unthinking acceptance of certain Darwinian propositions about human nature, he manages a great deal more. *Popper and After*, which Stove dedicates to the memory of George Orwell, is a breathtaking combination of literary-rhetorical analysis and philosophical housecleaning.

Today, the late Karl Popper is generally regarded as a venerable figure whose book *Logik der Forschung* ("The Logic of Scientific Discovery") deserves its honored place among the classics of the philosophy of

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science. Popper's influence is enormous; his ideas long ago became part of the intellectual atmosphere, taken-for-granted assumptions even for those who hadn't read him.

As Stove shows in "Cole Porter and Karl Popper: the Jazz Age in the Philosophy of Science," the lead essay of *The Plato Cult*, Popper reversed the central assumptions of the traditional philosophy of science. The long struggle of empiricism since Bacon had yielded a straightforward but powerful conception of science. Scientific propositions were distinguished from speculative or pseudo-scientific propositions by the degree to which they were verifiable; the method of science was essentially inductive, which means that it moved from the observed or known to the unobserved or unknown; the procedures of science were marked by caution; its results were held to be certain or at least highly probable.

Popper stood all this on its head. In his philosophy of science, we find the curious thought that *falsifiability*, not verifiability, is the distinguishing mark of scientific theories; this means that, for Popper, one theory is better than another if it is more *dis*provable than the other. "Irrefutability," he proclaimed, "is not a virtue of a theory . . . but a vice." Popper denied that we can ever legitimately infer the unknown from the known; audacity, not caution, was for him of the essence of science; far from being certain, the conclusions of science, he said, were never more than *guesswork* ("we must regard all laws and theories . . . as guesses"); and since for Popper "there *are* no such things as good positive reasons" to believe a scientific theory, no theory can ever be more probable than another; indeed, he says that the truth of any scientific proposition is exactly as improbable as the truth of a self-contradictory proposition—or "in plain English," as Stove says, "it is impossible."

It would be difficult to overstate the radical implications of this irrationalist view of science. Popper was apparently fond of referring to "the soaring edifice of science." But in fact his philosophy of science robbed that edifice of its foundation. Refracted through the lens of Popper's theories, the history of modern science is transformed from a dazzling string of successes into a series of "problems" or (as in a title of one of Popper's books) "conjectures and refutations." On the traditional view, scientific knowledge can be said to be *cumulative*: we know more now than we did in 1897, more then than in 1697. Popper's theory, demoting scientific laws to mere guesses, denies this: in one of his most famous phrases, he speaks of science as "conjectural knowledge," an oxymoronic gem that, as Stove remarks, makes as much sense as "a drawn game which was won."

If such ideas were merely the idiosyncrasy of a certain Austrian philosopher of science, they wouldn't much matter. But Popper's ideas did not only propound an irrationalist view of science: they also helped to *license* irrationalism for an entire generation. Without the bedrock—or, rather, the sandbank—of Popper's theories upon which to build, the other philosophers of science Stove discusses—Imre Lakatos, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend—could never have developed their own influential permutations of irrationalism. And without the example of these and other such gentlemen, the blasé irrationalism that infects the humanities and social sciences today—and, indeed, that infects our entire "postmodern" culture—might never have achieved epidemic proportions. Kuhn's famous book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which in effect denies that there is such a thing as progress in science, has by itself done incalculable intellectual damage to innumerable professors looking for excuses to deny the claims of scientific truth. (By the mid-1980s, Kuhn's was the most frequently cited book in the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*; the honor of being the most cited author went to Lenin.)

Of course, most people are uneasy about blatant irrationalism when it comes to science. They bristle if told that "no more is known now than in 1697." They balk if informed that "no one ever knows anything."

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Irrationalism, to be plausible, must be disguised, and Stove devotes the first half of his book to a brilliant analysis of the literary devices used to achieve plausibility.

There are two basic techniques. The first is to neutralize what Stove calls "success words"—words like "knowledge," "discovery," "facts," "verified," "explanation." Such words carry an implication of cognitive achievement. No philosopher of science can do without them entirely. But the simple addition of scare quotes alters everything: "Galileo discovers *x*" means something quite different from "Galileo 'discovers' *x*." (Stove remarks that the best title for Popper's book would have been *The "Logic" of Scientific "Discovery."*) The element of ambiguity is essential: consider the effect of a sign advertising "fresh" fish. Here for example is Imre Lakatos: "Michelson . . . was primarily frustrated by the inconsistency of the 'facts' he arrived at by his ultra-precise measurements. His 1887 experiments 'showed' that there was no ether wind on the earth's surface. But aberration 'showed' there was. Moreover, his own 1925 experiment . . . also 'proved' that there was . . ." The same trick can obviously be used with words of cognitive failure: "mistake," "false," "refuted," etc. A "refuted" theory is not the same as a refuted theory. As Stove comments, by skillfully using such devices, "you can have, as thick as you like on every page, all the optimistic *words* of the old historiography and philosophy of science, reassuring the reader," but without saying anything inconsistent with irrationalism.

The second technique involves deliberately conflating the history or sociology of science with the logic of science. Stove focuses especially on what he calls "sabotaging logical expressions." By embedding a logical statement in a historical context, one thereby undermines its logical status while preserving the *impression* that a logical claim has been made. A simple example is the difference between "P entails Q" and "P entails Q according to most logicians." The first is a logical statement; the second is a historical claim; it is what Stove calls a "ghost logical statement": it poaches on the prestige of logical entailment without actually making any logical claim at all: it is therefore completely immune to criticism on logical grounds. As Stove notes, "Once you mix the history with the logic of science, the possibilities of such sabotage are limitless." By such means, indeed, was the entire pseudo-discipline of "science studies" born.

Stove's analysis of how his authors manage to make their irrationalism plausible to their readers is a *tour de force*. So is his analysis of how they made irrationalism plausible to themselves. The key, at least so far as Popper was concerned, was the challenge to Newtonian physics by relativity and quantum mechanics. As Stove points out, this "changed the entire climate of philosophy of science," replacing the nineteenth century's blissful confidence about the impregnable certainty of science with a profound skepticism. Stove shows how Popper and his other authors, attempting "to ensure that no scientific theory should ever again become the object of over-confident belief," overreacted and embraced instead a form of irrationalism whose philosophical roots go back to Hume. The best literary parallel, Stove suggests, "is given in Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes. The parallel would be complete if the fox, having been convinced that neither he nor anyone else could ever succeed in tasting grapes, should nevertheless write many long books on the progress of viticulture."

At bottom, Stove shows, his authors embrace irrationalism because of "a certain extreme belief, by which their minds are dominated, about what is required for one proposition to be a reason to believe another." They all acknowledge that absolute certainty is impossible; but they assume that only absolute certainty will do as a warrant for rational belief. They exhibit, in other words, "a variety of perfectionism."

It is, of course, a disappointed perfectionism. Its chief effect has been to introduce an irresponsible levity and what Stove calls "*enfant terriblisme*" into intellectual life.

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One thinks, for example, of Paul Feyerabend insisting in *Against Method* that the "only one principle that can be defended . . . is *anything goes*." Disappointed perfectionism has also led to "the frivolous elevation of 'the critical attitude' into a categorical imperative." The principal result, as Stove notes, has been "to fortify millions of ignorant graduates and undergraduates in the belief, to which they are already too firmly wedded by other causes, that the adversary posture is all, and that intellectual life consists in 'directionless quibble.' "

Stove's demolition of certain aspects of Darwinian theory, in *Darwinian Fairytales* and related essays, is equally thorough and convincing. Stove is unusual among anti-Darwinians. He is not a creationist; indeed, as he points out, he is "of no religion." Moreover, he admires Darwin greatly as a thinker, placing him at the top of his personal pantheon, along with Shakespeare, Purcell, Newton, and Hume. Finally, Stove believes that it is "overwhelmingly probable" that our species evolved from some other and that "natural selection is probably the cause which is principally responsible for the coming into existence of new species from old ones."

At the same time, Stove maintains that "Darwinism says many things, especially about our species, which are too obviously false to be believed by any educated person; or at least by an educated person who retains any capacity at all for critical thought." Some examples: that "every single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase its numbers"; that "of the many individuals of any species which are periodically born, but a small number can survive"; that it is to a mother's "advantage" that her child should be adopted by another woman; that "no one is prepared to sacrifice his life for any single person, but . . . everyone will sacrifice it for more than two brothers, or four half-brothers, or eight first cousins"; that "any variation in the least degree injurious [to a species] would be rigidly destroyed."

These quotations are from Darwin and his orthodox disciples. A moment's reflection shows that none is even remotely true, at least of human beings. Take the last named: that anything in the least injurious to a species would be "rigidly destroyed" by natural selection. What about abortion, adoption, fondess for alcohol, and altruism, just to start with the A's? As Stove notes, "each of these characterisitics [tends] to shorten our lives, or to lessen the number of children we have, or both." Are any on the way to being rigidly destroyed? Again, if Darwin's theory of evolution were true, "there would be in every species a constant and ruthless competition to survive: a competition in which only a few in any generation can be winners. But it is perfectly obvious that human life is not like that, however it may be with other species." Priests, hospitals, governments, old-age homes, charities, police: these are a few of the things whose existence contradicts Darwin's theory.

Stove shows in unremitting detail that, despite its enormous explanatory power regarding "cods, pines, flies," etc., Darwin's theory of evolution is "a ridiculous slander on human beings." He is particularly good at exposing the "amazingly arrogant habit of Darwinians" of "*blaming the fact, instead of blaming their theory*" when they encounter contrary biological facts. Does it regularly happen that increasing prosperity leads to lower birth rates? And does this directly contradict Darwinian theory? No problem, just announce that the birth rates in such cases are somehow "inverted."

Indeed, Stove's analysis shows that, when it comes to our species, Darwinism "is a mere festering mass of errors." It can tell you "lots of truths about plants, flies, fish, etc., and interesting truths, too. . . . [But] if it is *human* life that you would most like to know about and to understand, then a good library can be begun by leaving out Darwinism, from 1859 [when *On the Origin of Species* was published] to the present hour." It is not a pretty picture that Stove paints; but then the exhibition of gross error widely accepted is never a comely sight.

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Spanish notebook

by Renee Winegarten

Dominating the first room of the exhibition "Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930–1945" at the Hayward Gallery in London was a huge canvas that occupied much of the far wall. Even viewed from a distance, this dim, religiose painting—seemingly unconnected with the Soviet workers striding purposefully into the future, and all the pagan impedimenta of the Nazis—could not be anything but Spanish. At once it evoked hours spent in dusty sacristies, in Avila, Burgos, or Valladolid, where bony relics of the saints were displayed for delectation and reverence. The name of José Antonio Primo de Rivera (leader of the Falange who was shot in Alicante prison in November 1936), painted on the outside wall of churches during Franco's regime, flashed in the mind's eye. On closer examination, the picture was found to be by José María Sert: it depicted "Saint Teresa of Avila, Ambassadress of Divine Love, Offering to the Lord of the Spanish Martyrs of 1936," meaning the nationalist dead in the first period of the civil war of 1936–39, a conflict that engendered appalling atrocities committed by both sides.[1]

Mediocre as Sert's painting was—and perhaps because it was so mediocre—it seemed to embody, not the spirit of divine love ecstatically expressed in the writings of the great Spanish mystic, but rather the very partisanship that would govern Franco's "Catholic crusade" against his own defeated countrymen throughout the long years of his rule until his death in 1975. Something was known of that enduring, cruel vengefulness, but the true extent of it stands revealed in all its unwavering ferocity in Paul Preston's gripping biography of the wily Spanish dictator. Franco saw himself as the reincarnation of El Cid, and as the heir of King Fernando of Aragon and Queen Isabel of Castile, "the Catholic kings" of the Reconquest that culminated in unity through the forced conversion or the expulsion of Jews and Moslems. The Irish-born Hispanist, Ian Gibson, who tenaciously uncovered many of the facts about the murder of the lyric poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca outside Granada in 1936, recently expressed his disappointment that the myth of the Reconquest, with its concomitant erasure of eight centuries of Jewish and Islamic culture, still has not been adequately reassessed in the public mind in Spain.

With Franco's regime, a pall descended on Spanish intellectual life which had been so flourishing in the Twenties and early Thirties. On the one hand, there were the republican exiles of various shades (liberal democrats, socialists, Communists, anarchists, and the rest), some long nursing their illusions of an imminent internal over-

1 The sixtieth anniversary of Franco's insurrection against the legitimate government of the Spanish Republic took place in July 1996.

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throw and the dream of their return home. On the other, there were the suppressed dissidents within the country: downtrodden, persecuted former republicans (all, no matter what their allegiance, now qualified as "Reds" and "Freemasons"), to be joined by students in revolt and disaffected writers in quest of intellectual freedom, who might well find themselves under interrogation, suffering torture and imprisonment. In what has been called "the culture of evasion" fostered by the dictatorship, where myths, lies, and obliquity prevailed, little of genuine interest and stimulation could find its way into print.

It is only in the last twenty years, since Franco's death, that many writers have felt able to speak out: consequently, there has been a remarkable flowering of writing in Spain. A few books (none belonging to the "avant-garde" of virtuosic wordplay after Joyce) are discussed here. One aspect of this florescence is the literature of exile and underground; the other deals with the response to conditions as they existed within the country. All of that might be considered the product of members of an older generation, empowered and free at last to give voice to their own experiences. And then there is the work of a younger generation of writers, conditioned by the past, wishing to reject it, but chiefly concerned with their own affairs and the state of their society as they find it today, a society whose problems (disarray, disillusion, sexual license, corruption, drugs) appear to differ little from those of many other Western democracies.

Because Franco died, after an excruciatingly long decline, in office and in his bed—and also because King Juan Carlos was Franco's nominee—there has been no clear-cut break with the past. It appears that the king, who famously saved Spanish democracy from the right-wing army coup led by Lieutenant-Colonel Tejero on February 23, 1981, either removed or toned down criticism of the military from the text of the fascinating and otherwise candid interviews he gave to the aristocratic novelist José Luis de Vilallonga. The consequences of such a blurring kind of ambiguity work for both good and ill.

Naturally, those who suffered deeply under the dictatorship want their compatriots to know all about the cruel injustices that they themselves and their families had to endure. These writers are the upholders of memory. In contrast, those who are too young to have shared such bitter experiences (along with their elders who fared well and have survived intact) do not want to be constantly reminded of the civil war and its consequences, or to hear any more about a regime that has passed into history. They are the proponents of amnesia. Nothing enrages the people who paid in blood, pain, and shame more than this urge to oblivion. Forgetting is seen either as the price of peace and quiet or as the source of future grief. This tragic outcome is one that is not confined to Spain alone: it is familiar to all those who have survived at great cost some terrible catastrophe that has damaged their lives, and who find that very few really want to listen to the tale that the ancient mariner has to tell, especially as in their case there is no poetic justice and no spirit of redemption.

In his reminiscences, *Los Escenarios de la Memoria* ("Scenes of Memory"), the Catalan literary critic J. M. Castellet wrote bitterly of the collaboration and complicity between Franco and the Church (which only lessened in the latter years of the regime). Castellet could now express his weariness with "so many years of stupidity, so much pointless cruelty . . . almost forty years of mediocrity, corruption, censorship, military rule, police violence, Church folly, all the subcultural demands of the so-called intellectuals of the regime." In his severe moral judgment on his country and his compatriots, Castellet was following earlier independent-minded writers who were critical of the suppression of dissent in Spain from the Counter Reformation onward.

Surprisingly, Castellet attributed the failure of the democratic victors of 1945 to overthrow Franco's dictatorship to their

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contempt for an obsolete, obscurantist Spain. He should surely have attributed it more obviously to the Cold War, which transformed the petty military dictator into a useful ally—notwithstanding his worship of Mussolini and of Hitler (an admiration that was not returned), his enduring faith in Nazi victory, and his utter contempt for the democracies. It was not one of the more glorious pages of postwar diplomacy, and it goes some way to explain Spanish distrust. Castellet, a skeptical fellow traveler largely because the Communists appeared to be in the forefront of resistance to Franco's rule, can be seen now as one figure among writers, including conservatives as well as leftists, who formed part of the internal intellectual opposition to the regime. They talked mostly among themselves, in private. For Castellet and his friends, in the dark days, the international literary conference (much satirized by the British novelist David Lodge and others) provided an invaluable outlet, a rare opportunity for a breath of air, for being able to speak one's mind freely without fear of a knock on the door by the police.

Perhaps the most remarkable and instructive of writers in exile on the Left is Jorge Semprún, who writes in French as well as Spanish, and who sprang to fame with his novel, *La Deuxième Mort de Ramón Mercader* ("The Second Death of Ramón Mercader"). Semprún has a great talent for arresting titles; witness his political thriller *Netchaiev ha vuelto* ("Netchaiev Has Returned"): from Trotsky's assassin to the equivocal involvement of intellectuals in the mysterious fate of a modern terrorist. . . . He is also well known as the screenwriter of controversial political films, *La Guerre est finie* ("The War Is Over"), directed by Alain Resnais; *Z* and *The Confession*, directed by Costa-Gavras.

Nephew of Miguel Maura, minister of the interior under the Republic, and son of a diplomat, Jorge Semprún was educated in France and Germany. As a young man he joined the French Resistance, and was captured and imprisoned in the concentration camp at Buchenwald. In youth a romantically idealistic adherent of the Spanish Communist Party, writing stomach-churning poems in praise of the leaders, and later a member of its Central Committee, he was sent into Spain at considerable risk to make contact with underground activists there. The account of his experiences can be found in his moving, disjointed exercise in memory, *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez* ("Autobiography of Federico Sánchez"), the name being one of his aliases in the underground resistance to the dictatorship.

The dangerous, hurried meetings with contacts on street corners, the safe houses that turned out to be not so safe, the friends who risked their lives to offer help, the dread of betrayal that could turn to fearsome reality, the loss of companions who vanished in Franco's prisons—these made up the clandestine existence of Federico Sánchez. And, as it turned out, for what? As Semprún tellingly reveals, the leaders of the Spanish Communist Party in exile believed their own rhetoric: they were absolutely convinced that an uprising was about to take place in Spain, and no information from those who were actually on the spot could convince them to face the truth. Their utopian hopes, their upbeat illusions remained unaltered. They, too, could not admit the free expression of opinion and dissent. When Semprún told them about the real situation which he had seen with his own eyes, he found himself expelled from the Party, by that famous "civil war heroine" La Pasionaria (Dolores Ibarruri) no less, in 1964. Thenceforward, he devoted himself to literature. For a while, from 1988 to 1991, he was to serve as minister of culture in the socialist government of Felipe González—like a Spanish heir of André Malraux without the right-wing conversion.

The political intellectual thriller, a genre favored by Semprún along with other Spanish novelists, found a notable exponent in Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, who discovered what he called "the possibility of a new realism through the poetics of the

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American *roman noir*." The influence of the tough-minded, demotic American novel (no less than that of Latin American fiction, with its convoluted, broken narrative forms) is much in evidence in contemporary Spanish writing. Vázquez Montalbán's series of detective stories is dominated by Pepe Carvalho, the sceptical, sardonic private eye, disillusioned former Communist, onetime agent of the CIA, and indefatigable gourmet, who first appeared in *Yo maté a Kennedy* ("I Killed Kennedy").

Take *Asesinato en el Comité Central* ("Murder in the Central Committee"), for instance, where Carvalho searches for the killer of one of the leaders of the Spanish Communist Party, mysteriously assassinated in a meeting attended only by close colleagues. This enables the author to run the gamut of political destinies, views, and responses among the numerous suspects. The police chief, with whom Carvalho has to cooperate, served as a dreaded torturer during the Franco regime. The novel, while giving much pleasure, conveys an ironic judgment on the changes and continuities in Spanish society. Vázquez Montalbán has also written fiction concerned with moral disarray toward the end of Franco's physical decline, when people were impatiently waiting for the dictator's demise. Such characters were already indulging themselves as they experienced the material prosperity fostered by the new technocrats, who had risen to positions of power and influence.

Born in 1939 in Barcelona, Vázquez Montalbán issued from the working class. His father, a Communist, spent five years in Franco's prisons, emerging completely broken and cowed, to give his son one piece of advice: never engage in politics. It was not common then for someone of Vázquez Montalbán's background to find himself at the university: he was older than his fellow students and regarded his presence there as something of a miracle. For taking part in a demonstration in favor of miners in Asturias who were on strike, he spent eighteen months in prison, where he wrote his first book. Recently, he published an extraordinary "novel," *Autobiografía del general Franco* ("General Franco's Autobiography"), strange because it consists of long passages of Franco's mediocre thoughts, ineffable self-righteousness and self-justification, interspersed with increasingly critical comments by the supposed author of the book, a certain Marcial Pombo.

Pombo's life story, which serves as counterpoint to Franco's, has many features in common with that of Vázquez Montalbán himself. Pombo, however, is no leading author but a literary hack in financial straits. He is offered a large sum for a popular autobiography of Franco, a bitter joke in itself, part of a series to include Stalin and Hitler —an offer Pombo reluctantly feels he cannot refuse. As he progresses with the book, penetrating into the odious mind and conduct of his subject, his indignation grows. Pombo remembers his own father, condemned with other defeated republican prisoners to hard labor on the construction of that hideous, creepy monument to the nationalist dead, the vast church of the Valle de los Caídos (The Valley of the Fallen), where Franco now lies buried. Pombo's father survived while many did not, to live out his shattered life in constant fear that communicated itself to the son as shame.

On receiving the completed text, the publisher makes no secret of his dissatisfaction with the author's interjections, and the book appears in print shorn of Pombo's hard experiences and savage sardonic commentary. The luckless scribe is told: "Franco made history and you endured it. Tough luck." Vázquez Montalbán's purpose seems clear: it is to remind his readers of the human suffering and waste that accompanied the grandiose and increasingly regal pretensions of the dictator. For the novelist, it is not only the history of repression that remains painful, but also the moral degradation, and the way in which the culture of his country was appropriated by sectarian interests in an attempt to wipe out the memory of the defeated.

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It would be consoling to discover that Vázquez Montalbán, and others among his fellow countrymen, had at least found some lasting solace in the establishment of democracy. The Socialist Party, led by Felipe González, swept into power in 1982 with a program of ethical reform. The failure of the scandal-prone socialist government to fulfill this eminently desirable project has simply encouraged the longstanding inclination of Spaniards to *desengaño* (disillusion). Vázquez Montalbán is not alone in criticizing the "liberal-capitalist civilization of today" (shorthand for the mores attributed to the influence of the United States) with its Kentucky Fried Chicken and its hamburger joints, doubtless particularly offensive to the creator of a gourmet like Pepe Carvalho. Nor is he alone on the Left in Spain (and elsewhere) in feeling that the collapse of the Soviet regime and its satellites should not be used as an alibi to deny the ideals and values that they betrayed. It may safely be assumed that the recent precarious victory of the center-right under José María Aznar will not alter this opinion, or frustrate the spread of neo-Marxism now current among intellectuals in Paris.

The tradition of a powerful and even cruel realism blended with an element of morbid fantasy, a spirit familiar from the etchings of Goya, pervades some of the writings of a younger generation. Traces of it can be found in *El Embrujo de Shanghai* ("The Spell of Shanghai") by Juan Marsé, with its themes of sickness, longing, delusion, desertion, and betrayal. As for *Madrid 1940. Memorias de un fascista* by a noted journalist, Francisco Umbral, these memoirs of a young fascist on the make mingle historical with fictional personages, penetrating a mentality of unutterable depravity and savagery. Particularly impressive in its unflinching awfulness is *Días Contados* ("Numbered Days") by Juan Madrid, which portrays the life of youthful derelicts in a rundown district of the capital, and those who prey upon them.

The leading character of *Días Contados*, a sort of "Last Exit to Madrid," is Antonio Santos, an ambitious young photographer who intends to make his name by producing a guide to the Madrid *movida*, a much favored word meaning something like "the swinging scene." He latches on to two very young prostitutes, Charo and Vanesa, already confirmed drug addicts, and various other losers. They are the little people, victims unlikely to make old bones. There is much discussion in the novel about the *movida*, something of whose spirit was captured in movies directed by Pedro Almodóvar—sexual games, plus an element that is astonishingly and even horridly outrageous. A bar owner in *Días Contados* maintains that his place was the center of it all—"If there ever was a *movida* in Madrid." Its participants were all in their thirties then, they had served in the struggle against Franco, and they felt the moment had come to have a good time. The *movida*, with its sexual permissiveness and drug culture lasted, so he claims, from Franco's death to 1984. By then they were all older, and were only interested in making money.

Two smart women friends, one of them Antonio's ex-wife, differ marginally from this view: obviously, my dear, the real *movida* lasted only a short while, beginning after Tejero's failed coup in 1981, it reached its peak in 1982 and 1983, "maybe a little later, and that's it." Spain, especially Madrid, became fashionable. Those in the swing visited New York for the first time: "American culture blew our minds." Now everybody goes to New York for bargains—how disgusting! In an interview, a film and television director claims that "we invented the *movida*": it consisted of about a hundred movers and shakers, but it did not last long, say between 1980 and 1985, with its high-point in 1982 and 1983. Then, in his view, it was taken over by a lot of provincials, and the bureaucrats decided it was good for tourism. It arose because the country was bored, thoroughly fed up with politics and economics, he says, and so there was a wild reaction of pleasure and permissiveness.

Clearly, then, Antonio has arrived on the

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scene rather late, at the beginning of the Nineties. He is slumming, and those he photographs so assiduously, the "friends" he cultivates at the bottom of the pile, are not the beautiful people but the doomed. His brother Pascual (some ten years older than Antonio)—a onetime Communist, active in the fight against Franco, "imprisoned and everything," a celebrated journalist who became Director General of Television in the early years of the fledgling democracy—is now set on making his fortune and is mixed up with a lot of shady people, an exploiter of Charo and Vanesa like the rest. Antonio shows the influential Pascual his sordid photographs, which in reality humiliate and exploit Charo and Vanesa in a different way, claiming that these pictures are a true document of our age, typical of any city in the world—young girls riddled with drugs who have to prostitute themselves to survive, people who do not know where they are going, lost in their pointless dreams: "after democracy, this is all that is left," says Antonio. Pascual's response is, "Who cares?" The pictures make him want to vomit: people are anxious to forget about all this low life. In the midst of the novel's scathing indictment of the libertine and the voyeur, the author contrives to portray the wretched inhabitants of the lower depths with a certain humane tenderness.

Disorder, depravity, corruption, decay: is that indeed all that is left "after democracy"? Nowadays, disoriented young people, for whom the post-Franco *movida* is already ancient history, confront an unpromising future of unemployment by living for the moment with drink, drugs, and raves. The young are said to have little respect for the government and for established institutions and received values. Few Spaniards are inclined to make a combined effort for the public good, thought Richard Ford, author of the celebrated *Handbook for Travellers in Spain*: he was writing of those he encountered in the 1830s, and present-day observers of the Spanish scene suggest that little has changed in that regard. Doubtless, cynicism concerning democracy is not confined to Spain, but it is an extremely disturbing trend that ought to arouse deep general disquiet. If there is any good news it is on the literary front, where Spanish writers are now at liberty to say and publish whatever they think and feel about social and moral dilemmas in their country—and they are doing so in a characteristically ironic and pungent manner.

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Two poems by Léon-Paul Fargue *translated & with an introduction by Louis Simpson*

Léon-Paul Fargue (1876–1947) was born in Paris near Les Halles, the illegitimate son of a chemical engineer and a dressmaker. In school, he had some extraordinary teachers: Stéphane Mallarmé at Condorcet and, in the Ecole Normale Henri IV, the philosopher Henri Bergson. (Bergson advised him to drop out of school.) Alfred Jarry, the future author of *Ubu Roi*, was a schoolmate.

In 1894 Fargue collaborated with Jarry in publishing *l'Art littéraire*. Henri Régnier brought him to one of Mallarmé's Tuesday gatherings, and Fargue was accepted by this inmost circle of the avant-garde. He began publishing at an early age with *Tancrède* (1895), a small collection of narratives in prose followed by poems. The next year, the *Mercure de France* published most of the poems he would gather in 1914 under the title *Pour la musique*. In spite of this early start, Fargue was reluctant to publish his poems—it was said that one practically had to tear them out of his hands. Modesty, or fear, or revulsion . . . some poets have a feeling of privacy about their work. There is a secret, not about themselves but about the poem, a mystery surrounding its birth. It is no great pleasure to see it dragged into the light and exposed to praise or blame.

After the war, Fargue was honored in an issue of *Feuilles libres*. Among the contributors who said that Léon-Paul Fargue was a great poet were Claudel, Picasso, Ravel, and Rilke. These testimonials may have been received with mixed feelings, for his poetry had few readers. He had to be content with friends, such as the poet and translator Valery Larbaud, who were able to appreciate originality, those readers whom Stendhal called "the happy few."

Nevertheless, Fargue was an important figure in the literary life of Paris. He organized lectures and readings at Adrienne Monnier's bookshop in la rue Odéon. The literary historian Robert Sabatier describes Fargue: "A dazzling conversationalist, maker of puns and epigrams, always amusing, sometimes disenchanted, he would be all his life a joyful figure." Anecdotes went around Paris about the comical things Léon-Paul said or did, but his writing reveals a different side, tender and often sad. Max Jacob said, "Fargue taught us to sublimate the life of everyday and make the highest poetry out of it." Additional poetry was collected in *Poèmes* (1905) and *Espaces* (1929).

Sabatier observes that Fargue inherited the Symbolists' art of half-tints and "fluidity." He doesn't aim to be modern in the usual sense of the word—he doesn't write like Paul Morand about a taste for speed and cosmopolitanism. Fargue's travels take place in imagination, "a universe of memory, visions, contiguous realities intended to retain indefinable feelings, regrets, foggy illusions, to fix the unsayable, wonderings before the beauty that suddenly appears at a turn in the road."

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Kiosques

En vain la mer fait le voyage
Du fond de l'horizon pour baiser tes pieds sages.
Tu les retires
Toujours à temps.

Tu te tais, je ne dis rien,
Nous n'en pensons pas plus, peut-être.
Mais les lucioles de proche en proche
Ont tiré leur lampe de poche
Tout exprès pour faire briller
Sur tes yeux calmes cette larme
Que je fus un jour obligé de boire.
La mer est bien assez salée.

Une méduse blonde et bleue
Qui veut s'instruire en s'attristant
Traverse les étages bondés de la mer,
Nette et claire comme un ascenseur,
Et décoiffe sa lampe à fleur d'eau
Pour te voir feindre sur le sable
Avec ton ombrelle, en pleurant,
Les trois cas d'égalité des triangles.

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Kiosks

In vain the sea makes the voyage
From the far horizon to kiss your feet so sage.
    You draw them back
                Always in time.

You are silent, I say nothing.
Perhaps we no longer think of it.
But the flashlights of the fireflies
Are coming closer. They wink
Just to illuminate
The tear in your calm eyes
That I one day was obliged to drink.
The sea has enough salt in it.

A blond and blue medusa
That wants to learn by being sad
Crosses the moving floors of the sea,
Neat and clear as an elevator,
And removes its lamp on the surface
To see you drawing in the sand
With your umbrella, crying,
Three cases of triangles being equal.

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Romance

Certes nous vous avons aimée,
Marie . . . Vous le saviez,
N'est-ce pas? Vous vous rappelez?

Un soir
(Nous partions dans la nuit
Arthème et moi), nous allâmes sans bruit vous voir
Sous l'abside du ciel d'été, comme à l'église.

Il y avait de la lumière et vous lisiez.

Nous avons gardé les dessins
Aux trois crayons, et les oiseaux à l'encre bleue
Que vous faisiez.

Ah! Marie, vous chantiez si bien!
C'était au temps
Où vous étiez heureuse à l'école des Soeurs,
Où la Procession toute pâle de fleurs
Chantait dans le désert du Dimanche.
Tremblant
J'étais auprès de vous qui étiez toute en blanc.

L'orgue parlait d'ombre à l'église . . .
Sur l'autel pendait le jour bleu.
Par les blessures du vitrail, l'appel de brise
Où fuse un gros bourdon d'onyx! chassait le feu
Des cierges, vers vous qui étiez grise
De lumière et de chants sages . . .

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Romance

We certainly loved you,
Marie. You knew,
Didn't you? Do you remember?

One evening
We set off at night,
Arthème and I, going quietly to see you
Beneath the apse of the summer sky, as at church.

There was a light and you were reading.

We kept the drawings
With three crayons, and the birds in blue ink
That you made.

Ah, Marie, you sang so well!
It was during the time
When you were happy, at the Sisters' school,
When the Procession of pale flowers
Sang in the desert of Sunday.
Trembling
I was near you, who were all in white.

The organ spoke of shadows . . .
On the altar the blue day hung.
Through wounds in stained glass, the call of the breeze
Fused with a loud hum of onyx, drove the fire
Of the candles toward you, tipsy
With light and sacred songs.

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Letter from Berlin

German farewells

by Christian Caryl

Considering the German track record with fairy tales, it seems odd, in retrospect, that no one noticed the cultural antecedents of the most successful movie of 1996. It was a plot straight out of the Brothers Grimm: irredeemably evil superbeings threaten the existence of everyday people with all their deficiencies and quirks; everyday people rise above their flaws to discover an inner strength they never knew they had; everyday people triumph over evil and live happily ever after.

When you get right down to it, there's nothing intrinsically American about the story behind *Independence Day*. O.K., fine, so the movie was shot in Hollywood with Hollywood actors. But the idea, the script, the direction, the camerawork, and many of the special effects came from Germans. Without Roland Emmerich, son of Stuttgart, *Independence Day* never would have happened. The director and producer to whom Germans now refer, with a mixture of horror and admiration, as *das Spielbergle* ("little Spielberg" in the Swabian dialect of his hometown), has lived in Hollywood ever since the *annus mirabilis* of 1989. But that didn't stop him from going back to the Filmakademie Ludwigsburg when he needed computer-graphics specialists to handle the effects for his movie. Explaining that decision in an interview with the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, Emmerich noted that working with the students from back home proved much cheaper: "At the big [American] companies you have to pay for a ton of bureaucracy, and then they even demand a share of the receipts."

The German conqueror of the suburban multiplex celebrating his triumph over the entrenched bureaucracies of Hollywood: the image is worth a moment's pause. The Germans, memorably described by Luigi Barzini as the changelings of Europe, are reinventing themselves once again, but it is not to politics that one should look for evidence of the process. Surprisingly little has changed in the German political landscape since the system of the Federal Republic expanded eastward to fill the vacuum left behind by the expiration of Communism. Essentially the same politicians who ran the Federal Republic at the end of 1990 still run the place today, and the ossified West German political institutions that have now become unified German ones are still managing to resist the considerable pressures for reform.

It is the Roland Emmerichs, not the politicians, who stand for the Promethean Germany of messiness and change. It is on the battlefields of the *Kulturnation*, not in the museums of politics, where the radical metamorphoses are taking place. This Germany is a frantic hybrid of Socialist Realism and popcorn movies and conceptual pretension, a place where screwball comedies cohabit comfortably with Holocaust novels, late-night chat shows, and wistful travel books about the territories lost at the end of

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the Second World War. A sense of indistinct movement and yearnings for an idealized past spawn muddled loyalties and inverted condescensions, unmasked frauds and startling defenestrations. Once German artists could be relied on to strive for a brusque if not always aesthetically persuasive righteousness; today disk jockeys are superior to mere musicians, biographical fraud assumes the guise of an aesthetic strategy, blatant copies of American comedy shows are treated as expressions of German originality, and grandiose exhibitions of avant-garde art are infested with fakes. Old identities have gone bankrupt. This is a Germany of *Dichter und Denker* deflated by the collapse of utopian designs. A famous writer tours Yugoslavia during the Bosnian War and returns to write an enthralled book about the enviable authenticity of the Serbs; others are revealed as informers for the East German secret police; a prestigious leftist journalist is exposed as an officer of the SS who managed to change his identity at the end of the war. A certain strenuous cosmopolitanism once characteristic of the old Federal Republic now coexists with an underlying urge to ponder Germanness in the mirrors of one's interlocutors. Other countries simply stage exhibitions on foreign countries; Germans in the 1990s stage exhibitions on Germans and Jews, Germans and Americans, Germans and Russians, Germans and the French, Germans and Poles. As this yearning for self-definition suggests, the old definitions have ceased to apply. The Bonn Republic is dead. Long live the Berlin Republic.

Volker Schlöndorff stands for Bonn. He might not think of it that way himself, but he should. It was Schlöndorff, perhaps more than any other West German filmmaker, who managed to reconcile the disparate impulses of his cultural era. In 1962 he joined other famous names like Fassbinder and Kluge and Wenders to sign the Oberhausen Manifesto, which, with obligatory revolutionary élan, declared lightheaded entertainment a thing of the past and proclaimed that the future belonged to a challenging and overtly political cinema. "Papas Kino ist tot!" went the rallying cry. The famous members of the Oberhausen group managed to achieve considerable foreign recognition, but it was Schlöndorff, in his movie version of the Günter Grass novel *Die Blechtrommel* ("The Tin Drum," 1978–79), who scored the real coup: his wicked but well-meaning political parable won an Oscar. Not only that, it was also a box-office success in Germany and abroad —despite its clearly highbrow aspirations.

It was with considerable interest, therefore, that I recently set off to a cinema in a nearby neighborhood of Berlin to see the new Schlöndorff movie, *Der Unhold* ("The Ogre"). Starring the American actor John Malkovich and based on the novel of the same name by the French writer Michel Tournier, *The Ogre* tells the story of Abel Tiffauges (Malkovich), a mysterious, naïve, and sometimes threatening man blissfully inured to the dull constraints of adult society—in which he distinctly resembles the dwarf hero of *The Tin Drum*. Like Oskar, his outsider status imbues Abel with an aura of the magical, and like Oskar he is drawn into the leveling maelstrom of the Second World War with predictably picaresque results. (Oskar joined the Wehrmacht as an entertainer of the troops, while Abel is a French POW whose magic-realist odyssey takes him from the ignominious defeat of 1940 to Göring's hunting lodge to a Nazi school at the far eastern edge of the Reich.) Like Oskar, who was from Danzig, Abel spends much of his time in East Prussia, and like Oskar he much prefers the company of children. Like Oskar he feels the pull of Nazi political theater and its ideological seductions, and like Oskar he is ultimately able to realize the error of his ways. Like *The Tin Drum*, *The Ogre* can boast some nice cinematography and features an impressive line-up of German actors.

But there is one notable difference between the two films: Schlöndorff's *Tin Drum* is secure in its identity. It is a film that could have emerged only from the

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slightly hysterical, socially engaged, upwardly mobile, unbearably earnest culture of the old Federal Republic of Germany, and as such the movie knows exactly what it's about. Though shot a good two decades after the appearance of the novel, the movie preserves the basic stance advanced by its author at the end of the Adenauer Fifties. A tendentious demolition of petit-bourgeois mores, underlined by a few strokes of clumsy slapstick, fuses with a certain underlying wistfulness about the losses—both territorial and moral—imposed by the war. To read *The Tin Drum* solely as a settling of accounts with the Third Reich is to underestimate the extent to which its anger is fueled by nostalgia for a squandered *Heimat*. (Nowadays, tellingly, German critics make fun of Grass for "traveling around the world to seek out people who still speak Danzig dialect," as I saw it put recently.) Ostentatious guilt and a nervously suppressed sense of loss: these are two emotions that neatly circumscribe the aesthetic universe of the West German cultural elite. The congeniality of their synthesis in Grass's book and Schlöndorff's film goes a long way toward explaining the popular success of the two works. They were events, celebrated on the covers of news magazines, and both were regarded by many contemporary critics as defining moments in the development of postwar culture.

The Ogre, on the other hand, has passed almost soundlessly through the cinemas of the land, and it is intriguing to consider why. Schlöndorff's *Tin Drum* may have been puerile but at least it was honest. The new movie instead represents what one might call the Trophy Wife School of cinema: Schlöndorff has tried to recover the hormonal surges of his earlier triumphs while understanding, on some level, the impossibility of the enterprise. The result is a movie that ponderously documents its own insecurities. The self-oblivious posturings of the earlier film have been replaced by knowing winks, like Göring's leer when he cuts the testicles off a freshly killed deer or forces Abel to sample the olfactory delights of animal droppings. The film, it should be noted, was preceded by a considerable publicity campaign. We saw pictures of the elaborate sets that would figure in the new movie, including a massive fortress of the Teutonic Knights decorated with grandiose Nazi decorations, and soon a few warning voices could be heard wondering whether Mr. Schlöndorff might be succumbing to the seductions of Hitlereseque political theater rather than exposing them. Such reservations, in turn, stimulated talk that the director was setting out to stage a heroic act of political incorrectness by demonstrating just how effective those seductions were. As a young filmmaker friend of mine told me, "If he had only done that, really taking it to the limit, it might have turned out to be a good film, really shocking. But he kept pulling back at the last instant, and the result is Jell-O." Abel, thrilled for a while by Nazi myth-making, naturally sees it for what it is in the end, and the final scene shows him wading through a beautiful icy swamp at sunrise with an adorable little Jewish boy, whom he has saved from a death march, riding on his shoulders. One suspects that no one in the old Federal Republic, the politically engaged West Germany of leftist artists such as Fassbinder and Grass and Joseph Beuys, would have noticed anything inherently objectionable about the image. Here it has the lifeless sheen of a computer-generated catharsis.

The premise underlying the art form of the political parable—that the function of art is to improve the world—was one of the few principles that the cultural elites of the two Germanys had in common throughout their long years of separation. But if West Germans such as Grass and Schlöndorff gravitated toward the anarchic turbulence and vivid individualism of the fairy tale, Easterners tended to favor the sedate assurances of myth—the one fictional genre, chock-a-block with characters of Hegelian stature, that seems to have appealed to Marx. The playwright Heiner Müller, for example, who died last year, made a career out of

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transforming mythological characters into politburo members, and Stalins and Hitlers into the stars of morality plays. (His final work, which debuted in Berlin shortly after his death, bore the modest title of *Germania*.) In an intriguing juxtaposition, his far more conventional colleague Christa Wolf chose the same year to publish a work called *Medea: Stimmen* ("Medea: Voices"), her first novel since unification. Both of these works are dark and disillusioned, yet they differ in at least one important respect. Müller's play uproots its own narratives and characters in a parade of fragmented scenarios, and as such it has already become historical, a textbook case of how an exhausted avant-garde is forced to feed on itself. Wolf's novel, a feminist reworking of Euripides, has a nearly classical unity and an unabashedly positive heroine. It is this almost quixotic conservatism, a hint of struggle between "progressive" yearnings and old-fashioned prose, that makes her work deeply indicative of the times. No cutting-edge pretensions here. Her language is the pure and undulating German, unmarred by a single trendy Anglicism, that still sets many Eastern writers in such marked contrast to their more worldly Western counterparts. At its best, this style has an unblurred probity; at its worst it smells of the dusty doilies and leather-bound editions of a vanished *Bildungsbürgertum*. This is a well-intentioned revision of Western tradition, not its deconstruction. The apostles of American-style PC want to chuck out all those books they've never read anyway; here we are expected to know the original myth, not to mention the countless variations, from which Ms. Wolf's counterreading derives. The European canon continues, as it were, but is merely to be expanded by a carefully proportioned dose of Dead White Females.

And yet, precisely like Schlöndorff's film, this is also an elegy, a text that records the passage of a world that will never be again. The book is filled with somber leave-taking. As in Euripides, Medea's love for the Argonaut Jason has motivated her to turn her back on her homeland of Colchis. Here, though, she kills neither her children nor her brother. In Wolf's readings, these deeds are ascribed to her as part of a smear campaign in revenge for her unwillingness to conform to the rules of decorum in her adopted homeland of Corinth. Wolf's Medea is still an enchantress, but it is mainly White Magic—herbal healing, psychotherapy, lessons in sisterly self-esteem—that she practices. She is haughty and beautiful, which would be bad enough, but what really makes her unpopular among Corinthians is her gift for calling it as she sees it, for daring to utter the inopportune taboo. If you are beginning to have the sinking feeling that there's an allegory in here somewhere, you're right. Corinth, it so happens, is in the West; Corinthians are arrogant, self-righteous, and obsessed with money. Colchis, located in the East, is economically and technologically backward, yet these barbarians (as the Corinthians refer to them) are ennobled by their legends about a golden age in which peace and justice reigned. Any questions?

As many observers have noted, Wolf would probably consider herself well-qualified to play the lead in a Medea movie. Before 1989 she was the undisputed High Priestess of East German literature. Over the years, she moved from straightforward Stalinism to qualified opposition to the Communist regime; at various times she was both informer and victim of the secret police. What she never abandoned, however, was a persistent belief in the writer as a moral hero. In her collections of non-fiction we watch as she offers sage advice to supplicants, fires off letters to the East German Writers' Union and PEN club, and ponders urgent questions selected from her capacious mailbag. ("After my last article in *The Weekly Post* I received one hundred and seventy letters, which I would like to see published as a historical document.") Yet like so many intellectuals of the Eastern Empire she never really seems to have come to terms with the sad truth that this elevated

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status derived directly from the deformations of a dictatorial society, and that the dissolution of that society would necessarily rob her of her peculiar privileges. At first she greeted the upheavals of autumn 1989 with enthusiasm, only to watch with dismay, like many East German idealists, as the revolutionary masses resoundingly rejected her notions of a socialist Third Way in favor of Bonn-style parliamentarism—at which point, with an impressive lack of irony, she concluded that the revolution wasn't one after all. After the fall of the Berlin Wall she published a treacly novella about her experiences as a victim of the Stasi without mentioning her earlier complicity with it, and then expressed surprised indignation when she was pilloried.

This disillusionment is something she shares with her Medea. The mythological heroine and the artist as moral exemplar speak unpalatable truths that are ignored or renounced by the crowd. (All the more so, of course, when the crowd consists primarily of men who can't stand strong women.) This antipathy, by the way, is entirely mutual. Wolf has repeatedly expressed her scorn for hoi polloi who voted overwhelmingly for the conservative Christian Democrats in East Germany's first and last free election as a separate country, and Medea reserves her greatest scorn for Corinth's "common people" or simply *der Pöbel*, "the mob," who refuse to acknowledge that they are only the marionettes of the powers that be. The actors in Wolf's novel are primarily aristocrats and politicians, a cast entirely appropriate, of course, to a Greek myth. Yet one is struck by just how nicely the terms of Euripides fit Wolf's own authoritarian world view. Here political culture, defined per se as the culture of those in power, is high culture, and high culture is very high indeed: lessons produced by privileged authorities for the consumption of the unwashed masses. They, unfortunately, aren't always up to the message (for Wolf has abandoned the old faith that the mob could be "educated" to behave in a good socialist manner). A comparison is instructive. Schlöndorff's film, for all its didacticism, at least tries to bridge the gap by putting the viewer in the place of someone seduced by the blandishments of the ruling patriarchy. An embittered Christa Wolf views the damage from above. Colchis has been abandoned to the past, Medea meets her death, Corinth is also doomed but no one is willing to admit it. The barbarians are at the gates. And in this final point, at least, Wolf is probably right.

Ulli, in his early thirties, lives in a Berlin apartment filled to the brim with video cassettes of American westerns. He knows the *oeuvre* of Sam Peckinpah by heart. Somehow he manages to keep abreast of the latest developments in the country music scene, too. Mention the names Fassbinder or Schlöndorff and he will spit. He and his friends are interested in writing screenplays for TV crime shows. Ask him about his politics and he will look at you blankly. "He and his buddies were sitting around here talking about splatter movies once," a common friend told me. "They know everything there is to know about splatter movies. Just for fun I asked them whether they thought that splatter movies might be, well, maybe a bit too violent. You know, any moral reservations? They didn't know what I was talking about." Not that Ulli isn't intelligent. He can explain with great eloquence and consistency why trash is the only game in town.

In the old days, a German like Ulli would have had trouble finding an audience. But, since the early 1990s, television here has undergone an explosion of commercialization; dull state-run channels no longer rule the airwaves. Suddenly, Germans are creating their own series, by the dozens—sometimes even their own sitcoms, unheard of just a few years ago. Homegrown pop music is accounting for an ever increasing share of the market, and most of the singers are singing in German. The German film industry is enjoying its biggest commercial successes in years, thanks to romantic com-

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edies rather than the politically conscious films of the Oberhausen ilk.

Economic reasons only partly explain this shift. It is also based in philosophy. The books and movies of the "young generation" are filled with jabs against the old spiritual monopolies. Sönke Wortmann's film *Der bewegte Mann* ("The Moved Man"), the biggest German box-office success of 1996, reserves some of its sharpest satire for an encounter group of middle-aged lefties who speak in touchy-feely jargon that insulates them from the world. (One of them, ideologically compromised when he is caught sneaking into a porno theater, tries to argue his way out with sociological gobbledygook.) The picaresque novel of a young East German writer, Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* ("Heroes Like Us"), makes devastating fun of Christa Wolf simply by quoting from the text of one of her speeches in the fall of 1989. It is worth noting, by the way, that this sarcastic response to the old sureties does not represent an attack on the Left by the Right, as some German critics have inevitably claimed. Prominent conservatives such as Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Botho Strauss, buoyed by unification, tried to promote cultural agendas keyed to national identity without any concrete effects (aside from some screams of horror on the Left). The revolt, instead, is one of Low versus High. It is a revolt against the snobbishness of a cultural elite who, in reaction to Nazism, elevated mistrust of the populace to one of the trademarks of substantive art.

Yet for all its playfulness there is something distinctly Teutonic about this new populist strain in the country's cultural endeavors. The works of the rising generation are less the product of an organic development than a conscious reaction, an adopted stance, a self-conscious program—as if the spirit of Quentin Tarantino had suddenly invaded the bodies of the cultural elite of an entire country. How well I remember the fearfully articulate young critic from a Berlin newspaper who explained to me over lunch why the main trademark of truly good literature was its ability to entertain; when I suggested that there might be a little more to it than that he looked pained and tactfully changed the subject. Germans wouldn't be Germans without theoretical underpinnings, and the relentless rationalizing of the new acolytes of the cult of pop makes one wonder whether this new fascination isn't merely the latest fleeting stop on the endless conveyor of German identities. Be prepared, in short, for a few new surprises from Central Europe. They may have reached the point where they can make a movie like *Independence Day*, but the Germans still haven't managed to find freedom from themselves.

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Theater

A lose-lose proposition

by Mark Steyn

Thanks to a canceled flight, I missed the long-awaited August Wilson/Robert Brustein showdown. So when padding about the streets of New York later that night I happened upon a television newsperson whose beat includes the theater, I naturally asked her how the big fight went. Alas, her editors had dispatched her to cover Liza Minnelli's ill-starred run in *Victor/Victoria* (by "ill-starred" I mean that, since Miss Minnelli's arrival on the scene, her leading man had taken to calling in sick). Before you start sniggering at the priorities of TV news, it should be said that Liza's woes—and the audience's—were a peculiarly vivid example of the issue at the heart of Wilson/Brustein, though it's probably not the issue they thought they were talking about.

Obviously, I can't review Wilson/Brustein as a performance (I'm eschewing the judicial formulation—Roe *v.* Wade—in favor of the theatrical: *Marat/Sade*, *Noise/Funk*, *Victor/Victoria*, etc). But, regardless of how they played it, what they said is worth discussing in and of itself. My precedent for this is Brustein himself, who's not averse occasionally to analyzing a production he hasn't seen on the basis of its script. As a much hyped event, the Town Hall *soi-disant* slugfest falls into the same category as the glitzy benefits and memorial services I've remarked on before: the hottest tickets in town are not for American drama but rather for its obsequies. Indeed, the "buzz" over Wilson/Brustein is the absurd *reductio* of present fashion: in a world which weighs art according to its positions on race, sexism, and homophobia, you might as well skip the play and have a debate.

It began last summer when August Wilson, a Pulitzered and Tonyed Broadway dramatist, stepped on stage in front of the Theatre Communications Group and proceeded to denounce the American theater as inherently racist, its funding bodies as white hegemonists expropriating black art, and "colorblind" casting as enfeebling to the black spirit. He demanded, instead, a black theater made by and for black Americans. You might think such remarks unexceptional, given the climate of trickle-up apartheid prevailing in America: if African-Americans can have their own Congressional districts, employment criteria, "history month," and, of course, language, why not their own theater? Wilson's proposal fits easily into that glorious pantheon: all theaters in cities with black populations of over 60 percent would be "converted" into "black theaters"—the white staff would be retired and replaced; black authors would write black plays with black characters, played by black actors, staged by black directors in theaters run by black administrators. Whitey's participation would be limited to paying for it—either through Federal subsidy or through the likes of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. Robert Brustein's response, in *American Theatre*, was a predictable assault on "cultural sep-

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aratism": "What's next? Separate schools? Separate washrooms?" To which many prominent members of the African-American community would reply: "Since you mention it, yes." Brustein's scorn had a touching naïveté. This isn't a debate about theater but about American society—in which the theater, due to a fatal combination of remoteness and wishful thinking, is especially ill-equipped to participate.

Many of Wilson's targets are well worth taking a shot at—especially the Wallace fund and the other big donors who provide financial incentives to encourage "diversity" in mainstream theaters: in other words, affirmative action for the arts. Put on a play about working-class blacks in St. Louis and they'll throw millions at you; put on a play about working-class whites in Presque Isle, Maine, and you'll get zip. It's a revolting trend, and an even more banal affront to artistic integrity than those love-struck moneybags who used to bankroll bad musicals in order to place their favorite chorine in a leading role: a fellow who says, You can do any show as long as it's got Gertie in it, is displaying a considerably more mature aesthetic sensibility than one who says, You can do any show as long as it's got blacks in it. Dollars-for-diversity is one reason why working-class whites have all but vanished from the American stage, and why so many indifferent black plays get produced. But, worst of all from Wilson's point of view, this policy has resulted in a black theater which plays mainly if not (statistically speaking) exclusively to white audiences. The "diversity" incentives might have some merit if the object were to lure blacks past the box office, but most of these regional playhouses depend on subscription lists, so the "New Jack Swing" version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* winds up playing to the same white theatergoers as Noel Coward. Even in the big town, when I saw Wilson's *Seven Guitars* on Broadway last year, I counted four blacks in the house. The rest were white folks passing a couple of hours with black culture, as Wilson is the first to acknowledge.

One of the curiosities of modern life is that the more the president and others insist that ending America's racial divide is the Number One overriding priority, the less urgent it seems. For many white Americans, race is irrelevant: the black world is mostly somewhere else far away and, insofar as it impinges on them at all, they've reached their accommodations with it—happy to welcome the middle-class black couple to their suburban cul-de-sac, but on the way back to the parking garage from *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* judiciously crossing the street when a guy in a hooded sweatshirt approaches. Going to black revues and musicals and plays, like enduring the president's homilies and a disproportionate number of African-Americans in TV commercials, is a small price to pay for having otherwise never to contemplate race. You might think this isn't any different from the Park Avenue crowd going slumming up in Harlem seventy years ago, were it not for one deliciously guilt-assuaging modification. Most of these plays are, to one degree or another, angry at whites—an irresistible *frisson*: Uncle Tom gets to whip Simon Legree.

For Wilson, the white audiences must be especially frustrating, since his entire *oeuvre* is, if anything, a reverie for the dignity of segregation—for the days when black sporting heroes were Negro League baseball players not boorish Nike pitchmen, transvestite buffoons, and double-murderers; or (if that example's too lurid) for the days when blacks had their own thriving retail economy, as opposed to enjoying the integrated pleasures of Wal-Mart.

Wilson is pretty hopeless at plotting, and his plays have developed their own reassuring conventions. For one thing, the white man will always let you down: if you run a lunch counter, he never brings you that jukebox he promised you (*Two Trains Running*); if you're an aspiring rhythm-and-blues musician, he screws you out of that big recording break (*Seven Guitars*). Often, the enticements of the white man so de-

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stabilize the community that blacks wind up knifing one another (*Seven Guitars*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*). It's an odd message from a black playwright who's been showered with honors by the white world and whose reputation has been made there. He now seems, once and for all, to have cast his lot with Troy, the ignorant protagonist of *Fences*, who, embittered by his nowhere job, builds a fence around his home in an effort to keep the white world out.

On Broadway in 1987, Troy was played by James Earl Jones, who imbued the role with his usual eloquent majesty. Aside from August Wilson, Jones has also played in Shakespeare, O'Neill, Steinbeck, and Ibsen —even though, according to Wilson, it is wrong for a black man to appear on stage other than in a black role: to consort with the Bard is "to be in league with a thousand naysayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his heart." Brustein, on the other hand, champions so-called "colorblind" casting—much favored in Britain: a few years back I saw a *King Lear* in which the old boy had two white daughters and a black one. The audience around me tittered a bit during the opening scenes, assuming not unreasonably that the King's missus had enjoyed a quick legover with the Palace milkman: to work, colorblind casting requires a colorblind audience. Besides, colorblind casting is, in practice, quite color-specific. For example, in the National Theatre revival of *Carousel*, Nicholas Hytner decided he had to have a black actor among the principals and so cast Clive Rowe in the role of Carrie Pipperidge's beau. We meet him when Carrie sings "When I Marry Mister Snow," and up he pops from below the windowsill—a fat, beaming black man. *Carousel* is set in a nineteenth-century Maine fishing village, where even today blacks are thin on the ground. And Mister Snow isn't just any old townsperson, but the most solid, stolid, respectable pillar of the community. A century ago, would such a man be black? And, if he were and wished to retain his eminence in town, would he be contemplating marriage to a white woman? Ah, the proponents of colorblind casting say, but you're not meant to respond to him as a black man. Yet clearly we are—for his entrance, at a line in the song designed to emphasize the mismatch of his name and his complexion, is greeted with a huge laugh. Furthermore, when the Broadway production opened at Lincoln Center, Hytner gave the part to another black actor; he chose to make it a black role.

I disagreed with Hytner's casting, mainly because of that huge laugh: it was a musical *comedy* moment in a musical *play*; the gag is at odds with the tone of the piece. By contrast, one of the most successful Phantoms of the Opera in America is a black actor. This is truly colorblind: the Phantom is a deformed misfit who lives in a sewer under the Paris Opera composing music; who knows or cares what color he is? Arguably, the casting of an African-American is a useful addition to what is, frankly, a sub-text-free zone: if you find it hard to understand how an opera composer wound up living in a sewer, then the fact that he's a black man in an elite racist European culture must surely help.

The question is, as Uta Hagen always tells her acting students, "What is it you want me to believe?" For Brustein to elevate colorblind casting to a principle is to risk further isolating the theater's dwindling audiences for a spurious egalitarianism. And, if we're to have colorblind casting, why not just plain blind casting? I'd have quite liked the lead in *Die Hard*, but I don't have the physique; I'd have quite liked the lead in *Striptease*, but I don't have the breast implants. However well-meaning Brustein may think he is, in the end casting *is* discrimination: you're too fat, too old, too short, too ugly, too faggy. I saw a play in Northern England a few years ago in which a chap disrobed in front of a blind woman; after a bit of blind casting around, she took hold of his manhood and purred, "Mmmmm! That'll do nicely!" Unfortunately, the actor was, to put it kindly, visibly under-endowed, and the line elicited wild

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shrieks and guffaws from the mainly female audience. Perhaps the director was deliberately making a bold attempt at penis-blind casting, no doubt in compliance with the relevant Equity guidelines on the subject. But the audience wouldn't buy it.

That's Liza Minnelli's problem at the Marquis. She's supposed to be a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman (if you can follow), but, in male drag, everything about her—her hips, her walk—looks wrong. And even in as slight a trifle as *Victor/Victoria*, you can't buck casting. In 1995, in these pages, I reviewed *Sylvia*, A. R. Gurney's comedy about the eternal triangle of man, wife, and poodle. At the Manhattan Theatre Club, the dog was played by Sarah Jessica Parker, bounding around the stage in a shaggy perm, barking "Heyheyhey! Heyhey!" at everything in sight and distracting her master from his job and his wife. It was, without question, that season's Best Performance in a Lead Role. Last year, the play came to London, re-staged by Michael Blakemore. "Who's he got for the dog?" I asked one of the producers. "Zoë Wanamaker," she said. "You might as well cancel it now," I said. Miss Wanamaker is an actress of a certain age, not unattractive but not conventionally sexy, and certainly not a plausible fantasy object for a middle-aged man. She would have been fine for the wife—she and the other actress looked the same age—but she was all wrong for the role of the puppy. Twenty years older than Miss Parker, she evidently found the part something of a strain physically, so, gradually, as she learned to pace herself, the bounding and scampering and panting were reined in. The play opened and closed in a couple of weeks—because Zoë Wanamaker didn't look right. If it's any consolation, Miss Parker, so right in *Sylvia*, is now not *quite* right in *Once upon a Mattress*, which seems unlikely to linger long at the Broadhurst.

For that reason, color-, age-, shape-, size-blind casting is never going to be much help except at the margins. In the more exposed medium of film, for example, Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* clearly felt obliged to pay lip service to the theory, but in the end, rather than risking an African-American Polonius or Horatio or even Rosencrantz, confined the black actors to the extras, dotting them among the Norwegian soldiers and Danish servants. However, Wilson's rejection of colorblindness is even dottier; in insisting that black actors can only play black roles, he's mounting an assault on the very foundations of the profession. Acting is what it says: an act. It's not about being what you are, but about being what you're not. To that end, you wear costumes, you slap on greasepaint. For Wilson to exalt one criterion above all others is to mock the very notion of acting. If black actors cannot do Chekhov, who can? Russians? Is the defining qualification for Macbeth that you be Scottish? Or a regicidal maniac? The more one considers Wilson's assertions, the more it sounds as if he should be working in some other profession altogether. The salient fact about James Earl Jones is not that he's black, but that he's James Earl Jones. As such, he's more persuasive as Timon of Athens than as, say, a gangsta rapper: his limitations are not imposed by his color.

Had Shakespeare listened to Wilson, he'd have junked all that Roman stuff and become playwright-in-residence at the Stratford-on-Avon Centre for West Midlands Cultural Studies, promoting the spirit of West Midlands cultural identity in plays about West Midlanders for West Midlanders. Why, Wilson wants to know, is white experience assumed to be universal and black experience somehow particular? The obvious answer is that Wilson wants it to stay particular: only black directors can stage his plays, only black actors, he says, can fully understand them. For every author, all drama starts off as a particular; it's for others to find the universal in it—sometimes in ways which surprise the writer. A few years ago, I happened to see a Scottish production of *Les Belles-Soeurs*, Michel Tremblay's 1965 play set in Mon-

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treal's East End and written in *joual*, the working-class dialect much frowned on in the Quebec of that time. In Scotland, the play was translated into a raw Glaswegian and for the finale, instead of *Les Belles-Soeurs* breaking into "O Canada" as a symbol of their submission to oppression, the company struck up with "God Save the Queen." Tremblay confided to me that, as a Quebecker, he'd been bemused to find that these Scots should have so identified with the oppressed Francophone working class of Montreal, since in Montreal it was the Scots who'd done much of the oppressing. But he figured, sportingly, that, whatever he might feel about his plays when they're at Place des Arts, other audiences in other cities were entitled to find what they wanted in them. No doubt some enterprising type could relocate *Les Belles-Soeurs* to Oakland and do it in Ebonics; by the same token, you could move *Seven Guitars* to Quebec City or Trois Rivières and do it in *joual*. I'm not sure I'd care for either transplant, but explicitly to deny the possibility is to rule oneself out of the business of theater.

In 1990, I happened to be in Cameron Mackintosh's London office discussing his difficulties with American Equity over the casting of Jonathan Pryce in a Eurasian—note *Eur*asian—role in *Miss Saigon*, when over the fax machine came a cartoon from New York. It showed an audition for *The Merchant of Venice* and the actor flashing open his raincoat: "Well," said the producer, "he passes the religious test." That's Wilson's theater in a nutshell. I'm reminded of Louis Benjamin, an old-school showman who ran Stoll Moss, London's biggest theater chain. A producer came to him to pitch what he called a black comedy: "Bloody hell," sighed Benjamin with an eye on the box office, "do they *all* have to be black?" Well, if you're August Wilson, yes.

I wonder what it is in his (so to speak) make-up that has led him to this position. At Town Hall, referring to his light skin, he observed, "When you look at me, it's obvious the white master visited the slave quarters." In fact, Wilson's father was a German-American and, as far as I know, he didn't meet his black bride by strolling over to the slave quarters of his Pittsburgh bakery. Wilson has *chosen* to be black rather than German—which is undoubtedly a sound move if you're going to promote touchy subjects like racial separatism. But, leaving the Teutonic aspects aside, I've always been struck by how un-African African-Americanism is. Only in America do blacks maintain that skin color is an overriding unifying feature, binding them to their distant cousins in that benighted continent thousands of miles away. Caribbean blacks don't feel that way: the citizens of St. Kitts, Antigua, and Barbados proudly point out the differences between them and Africa (i.e., the rule of law, non-genocidal changes of government, etc.). In Africa itself, a Botswanan or Gambian would be grossly insulted to be taken for a Rwandan or Zairean.

Long ago, before Brustein and Wilson took to the boards, there was another double-act in New York, "The Hebrew and The Coon": the Hebrew was the genuine article, the coon was Al Jolson. Without wishing to imply that Wilson is in any sense blacking up, I think it's an appropriate parallel: apparent opposites, Brustein and Wilson are actually the same—complacent pillars of a decayed theatrical elite. If (as *The New York Times* claimed) this is the hottest cultural debate since Mapplethorpe's glistening buttocks, then we're in big trouble: colorblind casting? black theaters for black actors and black audiences? The theater is not a parliament, its players are not delegates elected by proportional representation.

Around the time Jolson quit "The Hebrew and the Coon," America's thespian Jews began to move uptown to Broadway and in so doing universalized their culture to all our benefit. It is a natural trajectory. Even in Britain, the country's first non-European theater troupe, Tara Arts, started out as an Asian company and inevitably went multi-ethnic. How sad that August

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Wilson would rather lead his troops in retreat.

He doesn't see it that way: "Never is it suggested that playwrights like David Mamet or Terrence McNally are limiting themselves to whiteness," he says. No, but some of us suggest other limitations. The contemporary New York play is usually either Jewish or gay or both and almost always stultifyingly parochial. Neil Simon has never meant much in London, and Terrence McNally couldn't get arrested. Overseas, the American straight play is regarded as extinct. The Continentals blame it on the fact that the subsidized theater isn't subsidized enough, but you could just as easily argue that the commercial theater isn't commercial enough: even hit plays in New York elicit only an indifferent yawn on the road—and try naming the last one to make it to film. When Wilson declares that black culture isn't a ghetto, he's missing the point: theatrical culture is. Meanwhile, those of us who dislike the new apartheid can take comfort from Wilson's indignant retort to Brustein that "I'm a playwright. I'm not interested in starting a theater." Quite. He wants a black theater, but he's waiting for someone else to set it up and give it to him. In that at least, his black theater is little different from both other putative black enterprises and moth-eaten old white theater, where the principal deficiency is a lack of active producers. In the end, Wilson/Brustein was not *Marat/Sade* or *Noise/Funk* but *Funk/Funk*—two defeatists shrinking from the world even as what's left of the American play withers away. Sad/sad.

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Art

Giambattista Tiepolo at the Met

by Karen Wilkin

Let's get this part over with. No, you don't have any real idea of what the brilliant Venetian painter Giambattista Tiepolo is capable of if you haven't seen his great decorative schemes *in situ*. And yes, a great many of the pictures in the show at the Metropolitan are hung too low. Now let's talk about something interesting.

One of my colleagues declared that seeing a Tiepolo retrospective without the ceilings was like hearing the complete works of Beethoven without the symphonies. The complete works of Mozart without the operas might come closer to the mark, in spirit, at least—which is neither to say that I think Tiepolo is the painterly equal of Mozart nor to imply that the Met's show of a hundred pictures includes anything like the complete "other" works of the eighteenth-century Venetian virtuoso.[1] But if, at the Met, we miss Tiepolo's full-blown operas—those dazzling schemes that blow the roofs off Venetian villas to let us watch allegorical dramas enacted in a light-struck cloudscape—we still have the pleasure of his chamber music, his devotional works, and even his symphonies, in the form of *modelli*, fantasy portraits, altarpieces, and substantial portions of decorative cycles (albeit detached from their architectural contexts), which embody everything from secular hedonism to surprisingly convincing religious fervor.

To compare Tiepolo with Mozart is not purely a conceit, even though the painter, born in 1696, belonged more or less to the generation of the composer's grandfather. (Tiepolo was a closer contemporary of Rameau's.) Both Mozart and Tiepolo were masters of orthodox form who took enormous liberties within that discipline and both used their chosen artistic languages with astonishing wit and charm, without compromising eloquence. Both played games with conventional subject matter, Mozart by abandoning traditional opera stories drawn from mythology for da Ponte's racy tales of all-too-fallible mortals, and Tiepolo by presenting myths and stories from antiquity as though they were being performed, as you watch, by a troupe of very human, exotically costumed actors. Unlike Mozart, Tiepolo was no prodigy, even in the more restricted sense of the term as it applies to painters and sculptors. The earliest works on view at the Met were painted in 1715, when the fledgling artist, not yet out of his teens, was almost certainly still in the studio of Gregorio Lazzarini, to

1 "Giambattista Tiepolo, 1696–1770" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on January 25, 1997, and remains on view through April 27. The exhibition was first seen at the Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice (September 5–December 9, 1996). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Keith Christiansen, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (398 pages, $60; $45 paper).

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whom he had been apprenticed at fourteen; others date from the early 1720s, not long after his admission to the painters' guild. It is a very odd group of pictures indeed, from melodramatic spandrel panels of wildly posturing saints to rigid portraits of Venetian noblemen to an exuberant scene from antiquity, scintillating and restless, despite its badly deteriorated state. Mannered, derivative stylizations predominate in Tiepolo's youthful efforts, although, if you look hard, fluid and radiant passages hint at the mature artist's abilities. Tiepolo's debt to his immediate predecessors is obvious in all his juvenilia, but most of the early pictures are so inconsistent and so downright peculiar that it is easy to understand why this body of work has only recently been pieced together, with the help of scrupulous study of the documentation. As a fellow critic observed at the press preview, it's amazing that someone so unpromising turned out so well.

Throughout the 1720s, the young Venetian continued to explore a variety of approaches, from the dramatic to the—well, frivolous is really the only word. He provided abundant proof of his increasing ability to dispose figures easily and inventively in space, to surround them with sumptuous trappings, and to animate them with a mobile play of light, as he perfected his characteristic amalgam of the Grand Manner and the profoundly superficial. Tiepolo's success was assured by his technical accomplishments, especially by his ability to evoke light, flesh, and luxurious accoutrements with singing, dappled color. It was assured, too, by his facility in staging the subjects his patrician patrons liked best. He fed their appetites for the titillating with suggestive scenes from mythology and epic poetry, and he satisfied their desire for glory with flattering allegories and scenes of heroism and virtue that implied that the families who commissioned them not only shared these admirable qualities, but could claim descent, metaphorically speaking, from antiquity's most celebrated figures. Tiepolo was not only extremely gifted, but intelligent enough to choose first-rate artists to emulate or to quote from: the masters of the Venetian Renaissance. He obviously had plenty of opportunity to see their work and he clearly profited immensely from his study of these artists, especially Veronese—so much so that he was praised in his lifetime as "Veronese reborn."

For the most part, the exhibition at the Metropolitan is organized thematically, rather than chronologically, so that the fairly subtle differences in how Tiepolo rendered related subjects at various times seem more significant than the larger trajectory of his evolution. But in fact, once he hit his stride, his approach was more or less fixed; by the 1730s, Tiepolo was the painter we know. The alterations of mood and temperature visible in his work over the next four decades of his long career—he died in 1770—seem more like changes of key than of conception or attack.

The text panels at the Met are strangely apologetic. The authors of these texts seem worried that present-day viewers might be offended by the values espoused in Tiepolo's works, since they were commissioned by aristocrats more than two centuries ago. To offset this troubling possibility, they stress Tiepolo's modernity, as evidenced not by his pictures' ability to delight us, three hundred years after his birth, but by his "irony" and his thrifty habit of borrowing images from art that he admired. While they acknowledge that Tiepolo's art could be called light or witty, they remind us of his deep attachment to the art of Venice's Golden Age and the Baroque, and emphasize his seriousness as a religious painter, although they admit that he is never solemn. Those who see him as a master of complex cycles of wall paintings, the panels admonish us, are missing the point; Tiepolo was not just an inspired decorator. I suppose it is understandable, given today's intellectual climate, but it seems slightly condescending to both the art and its viewers.

The old-fashionedness of Tiepolo's "enterprise" is simply a fact. He worked mostly

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in the provinces, embellishing public buildings paid for by the Church and the aristocracy, and the homes of rich upholders of the status quo, who were, for the most part, untroubled by the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment. The Venice of "Veronese reborn" was not the great mercantile power of the time of the original Veronese; by the eighteenth century, La Serenissima was more celebrated for its licentious Carnival than for its control of Mediterranean shipping. Tiepolo was undeniably famous and enormously successful. He commanded high fees and his services were sought after not only by the patrician families of Venice, but elsewhere in Northern Italy and in Europe. "Elsewhere," however, tended to be places closely linked to Venice or provincial backwaters, such as the small German city of Würzburg, where Tiepolo painted one of his masterpieces, a glowing, cloud-filled allegory, with a heroic figure of the sun god Apollo, on the vaults of the stairwell. He spent the last years of his life working for the royal court of Spain, not exactly a center of progressive thought or overwhelming international influence.

Not surprisingly, the catalogue essays, edited by Keith Christiansen, address the interesting question of Tiepolo in the context of his time with more subtlety and offer more compelling observations than the wall panels. While it is generally agreed that Tiepolo's allegories and mythologies, with their programs of aggrandizement and hyperbole, looked less over the top in the eighteenth century than they do today, it is also agreed that such motifs and such messages were already a little outmoded when Tiepolo was working on them. Donald Posner's excellent, thoughtful essay, "Tiepolo and the Artistic Culture of Eighteenth Century Europe," provocatively compares Watteau and the Venetian master, the former as a harbinger of the future, the latter as a living vestige of a vanishing past. Watteau, who painted portable canvases, that created evocative moods, without illustrating specific stories, for art dealers to sell, seems almost a modern artist, while Tiepolo, whose most important works were symbolic narratives commissioned for specific settings by the leaders of what Posner calls "marginalized and reactionary societies," seems to belong to a vanished breed. That both flourished in the eighteenth century, Posner comments, "illuminates the extraordinary heterogeneousness of the artistic culture of the time." William L. Barcham in an otherwise breathless, perfumed essay —"tusked pachyderms" when "elephants" would have done just fine—entitled "Tiepolo as a Painter of History and Mythology and as a Decorator" admits that "even today's well educated public may find that Tiepolo's references stand on the other side of a broad cultural canyon," since his century "encompassed events and saw the emergence of ideas that irrevocably divorce his political and artistic civilization from ours." Tiepolo, Barcham reminds us, "was born in a thousand-year-old republic that died shortly after he did." The French monarchy that seemed so secure when the painter was a young man was overthrown a decade and a half after he died. The United States was established six years after his death. Yet, Barcham points out, "precisely because Tiepolo's breathtakingly beautiful paintings of classical and poetic subject matter speak a language of a lost culture but originate in a time so close to ours, they offer the modern world a unique gateway to the past."

Barcham believes that unraveling the meaning of Tiepolo's allegories or understanding his (often) obscure historical and mythological allusions can make us admire the artist's ingenuity all the more and enhance our enjoyment of his works. But we can be engaged by the way pictures whose subjects still remain open to debate or whose stories we only half-recognize are painted, just as we can be ravished by the shifting light, luminous color, and preposterous illusionism of one of Tiepolo's allegorical ceilings without caring what each of the floating figures is meant to symbolize. In the end—and I realize this is heresy

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in the face of both serious scholarship and present day enthusiasm for Art with a Message—the pleasure offered by Tiepolo's art seems to have less to do with subject, attitude, or even the aspirations of the artist, than it does with painterly delights: lushly orchestrated color, animated figures, flickering, moist light.

The Met show provides plenty of these, particularly among the paintings from the 1740s, when Tiepolo was at the height of his powers. *The Last Communion of St. Lucy* (1748–49, SS. Apostoli, Venice)—shown, like many of the religious paintings, with its *bozetto*—swirls around a plunging shaft of light. In the finished altarpiece, the lively, nervous drawing of the small version is translated into the unstable play of brights and darks, its earthy palette sharpened into a clash of dull gold, apricot, and supersaturated ultramarine; like Matisse, Tiepolo knew how to heighten chromatic color with neutrals, surrounding tender pinks and glowing oranges with silvery greys and luminous tans. *St. James of Compostella* (1749, Szémüvészeti Múzeum, Budapest), is another tour de force, with its mysterious, dark Moor, collapsing in the throes of ecstatic conversion, its violent battle scene visible through the legs of the saint's horse, and its harmony of creamy whites, pale salmon-rose, dull green, and celestial blue. It's a coloristic feast that becomes more delectable the longer you look, but, as with the majority of Tiepolo's religious pictures, the sensuality of the painting as painting seems oddly detached from the mood of the image. There are exceptions, of course, in which intensity of religious feeling seems to have found an equivalent in agitated brushstrokes. That *St. James*—like most of the works in the Met show—is hung too low for Tiepolo's illusionism to be completely convincing is an acute problem, but even if it were installed at a height at which the picture's foreshortening would make sense, no one would ever confuse this exaggerated, iconic depiction with reality.

Tiepolo is a master of stagecraft. (A current theory holds that he was influenced by the theatrical productions of his period, which is plausible, except that little is known about eighteenth-century practice.) Whether he presents us with a tale of beguilement, witchcraft, passion, and renunciation, from Tasso's great epic poem of the crusades, a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, or a definitive moment from Roman history, Tiepolo turns it into a masterpiece of theatrical artifice. Everything is more intense than in actuality; everything shimmers and flickers, flutters and twists, the broken, patchy color heightening the suggestion that a breeze is blowing through the picture. Tiepolo's "characters" strike poses, standing in ways that define the word *contrapposto*. They gesticulate dramatically, spreading fingers that seem to have more joints than usual. Like actors, they wear exotic garments, from another place and another time. All fabrics are silky, satiny; even beggars wear gleaming cloth.

It can seem silly, stagy, and at times, bombastic, even a little pompous. It's difficult, for example, to take seriously the weird, raunchy *Danaë and Jupiter* (1734–38, The Stockholm University Art Collection), in which Jupiter rides a rock-solid cloud like a stallion, an old serving woman in seventeenth-century dress holds a golden salver in exactly the wrong place to catch the (very sparse) shower of gold, and an overfed Cupid displays the sleeping Danaë's extremely ample haunch, not to Jupiter, it seems, but to the viewer. Add to this an architectural setting that turns Danaë's enclosed tower into an open, sunlit Neoclassical colonnade, and you have a perfect example, albeit gorgeously painted, of what used to be called, before Susan Sontag, "unintentional camp." In fairness, the mature Tiepolo brought off an even more bizarre conception with far more success in *The Death of Hyacinthus* (c. 1752–54, Fondacíon Coleccíon Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid), in which Apollo—looking strangely like Mark Morris in one of his more tasteless movements—and the dying youth, his belt suggestively loosened, are piled pre-

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cariously together with a fat *putto* in a relationship that defies logic. (According to the catalogue entry, the silliest part of the picture, the substitution of a tennis ball, with racquet and discarded balls downstage left, for the discus that Ovid says killed Hyacinthus, is not Tiepolo's fault; he was following a sixteenth-century translation of the Latin poem into Italian.) It's a risky picture that could have seemed as ridiculous, to modern eyes, as that dreadful Thomas Hart Benton anachronism of the rape of Proserpina, with Pluto as a dirty old man in a farmer's straw hat and overalls, and the object of his attentions, nude except for her modish high heels, posed like a Forties pinup. But Tiepolo's golden light and dramatic viewpoints save the day. *The Death of Hyacinthus* is a curiously touching and beautiful picture.

No one who cares about painting, no matter how high-minded or puritanical, could be wholly indifferent to the fluency of Tiepolo's line or the tastiness of his color. And no one who has spent any length of time in Venice could fail to respond to his potent evocation of that city's magical light. The unsteady reflections on Venetian walls, the limpid sunlight of the piazzas, the ripples of light bounced from the canals to the tall ceilings of rooms, all have equivalents in Tiepolo's crackling, shining fabrics and pearly flesh.

Is the show at the Metropolitan the ideal way to celebrate Tiepolo? Of course not. For that, you would have had to have gone to Venice last year, where the show was organized to commemorate the painter's three-hundredth birthday and installed in the Ca' Rezzonico, with its Tiepolo ceilings. But even then, to fully grasp the Venetian master's achievement, you would have had to have visited the other Venetian palazzi and churches where works remain *in situ*, made side trips to Vicenza and Udine, and, I am told by those who have made the trek, traveled to Würzburg. But there is a good deal to be learned from the works at the Metropolitan, as well as a great deal of pleasure to be had. And if we lack the marvelous context that the show had in Venice, there are smaller but informative compensations in the form of related exhibitions at the Met and the Pierpont Morgan Library. The most spectacular is probably the remarkable survey drawn from the Metropolitan's collections of drawings, prints, and paintings by Giambattista's gifted son and assistant, Domenico, who was a more than respectable artist in his own right.[2] Add the Met's "Venetian Prints and Books in the Age of Tiepolo"[3] and the Morgan Library's impressive "Tiepolo and His Circle: Drawings in American Collections"[4] and the assiduous viewer will need, at the very least, a plate of that Venetian specialty, *risi e bisi*—risotto with green peas—and a large glass of Amarone, to recover. Of course, *spumante* seems a better metaphor for the work of Giambattista Tiepolo, but it doesn't come from the Veneto.

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2 "Domenico Tiepolo: Drawings, Prints, and Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" opened on January 23, 1997, and remains on view through April 27. A bulletin of the exhibition, by Linda Wolk-Simon, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (68 pages, $8.95).

3 "Venetian Prints and Books in the Age of Tiepolo" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on January 23, 1997, and remains on view through April 27. A catalogue of the exhibition, by Suzanne Boorsch, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (48 pages, $14.95).

4 "Tiepolo and His Circle: Drawings in American Collections" opened at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, on January 17, 1997, and remains on view through April 13. The exhibition was first seen at the Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts (October 12–December 15, 1996). A catalogue of the exhibition, by Bernard Aikema, has been published by the Harvard University Art Museums and the Pierpont Morgan Library (347 pages, $55).

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Romare Bearden at the Whitney

by Mario Naves

"Right now, it is almost impossible to go into a bookstore and not come across a book with Romare Bearden's art on its cover." So writes Thelma Golden in the catalogue accompanying "Romare Bearden in Black and White: Photomontage Projections 1964."[1] As someone who frequents bookstores, I can vouch for her observation. Bearden's imagery is in demand for books which, as Golden states, "have something to do . . . with the 'black experience.'" This is fitting, of course, for Bearden's great subject was (in his own words) "the validity of my Negro experience." In his finest work, the collages of his maturity, Bearden created a deeply felt and rigorously complex chronicle of black America. It is a rooted and elegiac art but also a joyous one, embodying African-American life, in all its multiplicity, with pictorial know-how and an unabashed humanity. No wonder book-jacket designers love him.

The quotation marks Golden places around the phrase "black experience" are telling. She knows that generalities can be as constraining as they are convenient, and writes that the "common reduction of his work to a mere visual record of the black experience" is "an underlying problem in the literature on Bearden." Indeed, attempts at classifying Bearden (or his audience) are antithetical to the spirit of his work. It is important to recall that he wanted "to paint the life of my people as I know it—as passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day." So while Bearden's imagery finds its origins in the anecdotal, it lives—and robustly so—as art. Can Golden really be suggesting, then, that Bearden's work be measured not as tokens of group identity, but as works of art? Who would have thought that a curator at the Whitney would stoop to such a woefully unhip notion?

There is ample evidence of Bearden's talent in "Black and White." The impetus for the projections—in actuality, photographic enlargements of collages—came in response to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Bearden, along with Hale Woodruff, organized a group of black artists whose avowed purpose was to create an art that would address the social issues of the day. Calling themselves Spiral, they set out to organize an exhibition titled "Mississippi 1964" which, at Bearden's suggestion, was later changed to the less pointed "Black and White." (This gives an indication of Bearden's leanings as a political artist.)

1 "Romare Bearden in Black and White: Photomontage Projections 1964" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York, on January 17, 1997, and remains on view through March 20. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Thelma Golden and Gail Gelburd, has been published by the Whitney Museum and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (88 pages, $18.50 paper).

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Bearden had hoped that Spiral would collaborate on a mural, but found that his enthusiasm was met with little interest from the other members. His enthusiasm did find its fruition, however, in the projections and we should be grateful for Spiral's lack of initiative on the proposed mural. It was this series, after all, that launched Bearden's subsequent exploration of the art of collage. For this reason alone, the projections are crucial to the development of Bearden's *oeuvre*.

Unfortunately, as an exhibition, "Black and White" lacks power. It is, certainly, rife with sophisticated images, but it doesn't make much of an impact aesthetically. This isn't, as one might suppose, a function of the modest gallery at Philip Morris—vanity spaces don't preclude good, or important, exhibitions. What's required is a sensitivity to the way works of art speak to each other (or by themselves) and such sensitivity seems to be beyond the Whitney. A more charitable soul might regard the herky-jerky installation as a reflection of Bearden's packed compositions. But Bearden's work isn't helped by the clutter; it needs breathing room. There are simply too many pieces crammed into too little space here. Add to this the bulky frames the photos have been mounted in and bright yellow-orange walls, and one has a show that all but obscures the art it is supposedly showcasing.

If the installation homogenizes Bearden's imagery, it should be said that the photomontage technique he employed has not a little homogeneity to it as well. By photographing his collages, Bearden gave the resulting projections a grainy, documentary feel. Yet they're transferred from one medium to another, and it's obvious that the photographs were, if not afterthoughts, then not the main event. Bearden's heart was in the collages. Compare the collage *Evening 9:10, 461 Lenox Avenue* (1964) to its posterlike companion and one instantly becomes aware of the former's intensity. The projections are incapable of conveying the artist's gift for investing pieces of stuff with poetry. So no matter how impressed one may be by an image as grave as *Cotton* (1964), one leaves the exhibition wanting the collages themselves.

Not surprisingly, it is the half-dozen small collages included here that truly engage us. None of them are among Bearden's masterpieces—although the garish *Evening Meal of the Prophet Peterson* (1964) is the weirdest Bearden I have ever seen—but they display the artist's strengths to good effect. Looking at the collages, we share in the artist's love of the medium's facture—all those disparate scraps of information cobbled together by hand. As piecemeal as they seem physically, the collages are, nevertheless, orchestrated wholes; they're seamless. (Yet there are literal seams in them that do work against the whole.) What entrances us about *Conjur Woman* (1964) is the remarkable composition Bearden creates out of jarring elements. While surface isn't everything in Bearden's art—if it were we might not consider it as seriously as we do—tactility is paramount; it gives the work its body and, yes, its soul.

The status of collage in modern art gained parity with that of painting, drawing, and sculpture. It was a radical medium, especially in the hands of the Cubists, and collage's innate "disharmony" proved an ideal vehicle for the Surrealists and Dadaists. In a formal sense Bearden cannot be said to have been an innovator. He did not introduce anything new or "shocking" to the art of collage. He did, however, enrich the medium by placing an emphasis on symbol, narrative, and history; in short, an encompassing vision that is almost premodern in nature. This is not to say that his collages don't add up formally—they do—or that they are oblivious to twentieth-century precursors. The train in the upper left-hand corner of *Tidings* (1964), for example, is a classic bit of Surrealist whimsy until one intuits the symbolic heft it carries. Bearden may have been sympathetic to the slippery lyricism Surrealism was capable of, but one feels that he was too level-headed to fall for its loonier variants. Likewise, his apprecia-

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tion for the anti-art escapades of the Dadaists must have been tepid. Any artist who made photographic enlargements of Giotto's paintings in order to gain an understanding of pictorial structure is someone for whom tradition is no small matter.

The shock of green seen in the collage *Conjur Woman* (1971) adds much-needed color to "Black and White" and is reminiscent of Matisse's *papiers collés*. Yet, the pivotal influence on Bearden's collages was that of Cubism and, especially, Picasso. One may go so far as to state that his art would not be as extraordinary—it would certainly be drastically different—were this not the case. This is not to denigrate Bearden's achievement. The same is true of practically every artist of consequence in the twentieth-century. It is the constructivist aspect of Picasso's work that became an integral part of Bearden's art, and one tends to think of the collages as having been built. What holds the kaleidoscopic *The Dove* (1964) in tenuous equilibrium, for instance, is an architectonic framework that is the purest Cubism. In fact, Bearden's love of art was ecumenical, and the lessons he gleaned from it—whether it be Picasso or quilts, Vermeer or African masks—were masterfully consummated in the collages.

The best projections are those whose contrasts of value are dramatic. Two such works are *Jazz (Chicago) Grand Terrace–1930s* and *Jazz (N.Y.) Savoy–1930s* (both 1964). If it has become compulsory to refer to jazz when writing about Bearden's work, it is because he found within it a corollary to his own art. These two good-humored and rollicking homages practically burst from the wall and their enthusiasm is infectious. Another memorable projection is the ominous *Spring Way* (1964), a depiction of the city as an aggregation of jutting and abutting planes. Here mass and open space are indistinguishable; the urban environment is reduced to blocks of architectural incident—shuttered windows, stairwells, and cornices—whose lone occupants are a glimpsed face in a window and a shadowy figure descending a stairwell. The geometric density of *Spring Way* recalls both Léger's *The City* and, for New Yorkers anyway, a walk around the block. These works break out of the show's monotony by packing graphic punch. Still, at the risk of nagging, one misses (and wishes) for the actual pieces.

Is "Black and White" the "first step toward a comprehensive assessment of Bearden and his place in the history of American art" as is claimed in the exhibition brochure? How secure is Bearden's standing? He certainly met with considerable recognition during his lifetime and has been the subject of many articles, books, and exhibitions. He is, as Golden writes, "beloved" and how many artists can that be said of without wincing? Yet there is an irritating sense that Bearden has not received his due as an artist. The winds of art history are fluky, of course, and, admittedly, I'm a fan. But Bearden deserves a more important place than the one he now occupies. To make such a claim isn't a matter of meeting quotas—I could say the same thing about Ralston Crawford. It's a matter of quality, and the quality of Bearden's art is high indeed. "Black and White" may start the ball rolling. Perhaps then Bearden will be less the finest black modern artist, as I have heard him described, than one of the finest American artists of this troubled century.

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The media

Lionizing the networks

by James Bowman

Since the advent of the high postmodern period in the early Nineties, I have come to be something of a connoisseur of po-moments in public life. Of course, in the arts and in the academic world, postmodernism has been around for some time, but I date its debut in the public square to 1990 when George Bush reneged on his "read my lips" pledge of less than two years earlier. It wasn't, of course, just that a politician broke a promise. That was nothing new. But this was a promise by which the politician was identified in the public mind. It was the one thing that everybody knew about George Bush. "Read my lips . . ." is probably still his best hope for winning an entry in Bartlett's. He knew this at the time, and he broke the promise almost off-handedly, without shame and without being held to account for it by the opposition party (who of course rejoiced in private) or the press.

The result, for me, was that sense of dislocation which I have since come to recognize as the po-momentary hallmark. Why was there no public outcry, no outpouring of revulsion—except in the fringe right-wing press? Wasn't something crazy here? I don't mean just normally crazy, but crazy with the profound craziness of crazy normality. The system's tolerance for the poison of lies and impostures and contradictions had grown to the point where it was actually feeding off them. Anyway, it was at about that point when we stopped expecting even the appearance of minimum rhetorical consistency from our public men. And just as only Nixon could go to China, so only Bush—the good, old-fashioned, decent war-hero George Bush—could lead his country into the postmodern age which has been beckoning since the sixties.

If, as some think, it was Bush's breaking of his "read my lips" pledge that got him defeated in 1992, the delayed resentment of the casually cozened citizenry produced one of what Thomas Hardy used to call "life's little ironies." For Bush's successor has proven to be the man who brought postmodern politics into its own as the politics of our time. Bill Clinton was a budding postmodern eminence as early as 1969, when he wrote to Colonel Holmes of the University of Arkansas ROTC that he was so distraught about the Vietnam War that he was eating too much. It was a titanically, a monumentally insensitive statement for him to have made while men were dying. Colonel Holmes must have kept the letter because he regarded it, alas erroneously, as a unique example of chutzpah. Only someone congenitally too self-absorbed to be able to imagine any disjunction between his own fine feelings and reality could have written it. The feelings are the only reality that he recognizes.

Even so, it must have taken the intervening twenty-seven years of practice for him to tell the Republican Congress in his State of the Union address last year that "the era of big government is over"—a Congress which

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may have owed its existence to the defeat of this same man's proposal to create the biggest big-government program in the history of the republic. So, too, in his recent inaugural address, he spoke of "a government that is smaller" at the same time he was proposing steady increases in government spending and a host of new (albeit mostly moderately priced) government initiatives. Even this example seems mild next to his call for bipartisan campaign finance reform in reply to accusations of his and his party's fundraising hanky-panky. As Wesley Pruden of *The Washington Times* wrote: "Only a man incapable of shame could say this in public." But shame takes two, one to feel it and one (or more) to make him feel it, to turn away in disgust from what he has done so that he may feel just a tincture of the disgust himself. It is not Bill Clinton's shamelessness which is remarkable so much as the shamelessness of those around him, the press and the public, who have stopped thinking it remarkable.

The great emblem of our time may come to be seen as the coincidence of Clinton's latest State of the Union address with the verdict in the second O.J. Simpson trial. The networks' frantic switching back and forth between the two highlighted the extent to which they were exactly equivalent spectacles, in televisual terms—featuring "scandal-tinged" celebrities putting on a show which everyone knows and no one cares is an imposture. The press had made both into "media events" and so judged them as media events.

So it is that what must be (but then, each example tops the last) the *ne plus ultra* of postmodern tastelessness in the President's speech, his comparison of himself to the promised messiah of 2 Isaiah, passed almost unnoticed. It made even his extravagant promises of utopia, even his barefaced plea that "politics stop at the schoolhouse door"—although his own most prominent organized support in the last campaign came from the National Education Association—look timid and uninteresting by comparison. But once you've stopped being outraged, how do you start again? It was a good speech, most commentators agreed—meaning a good show. Sometimes it is beguiling to think of Clinton as being secretly very alive instead of (as he appears) very dead to irony. Could he be playing the postmodern president not just because it comes naturally to a narcissist like him but because it amuses him to see how far he can go, and what he can get away with? If so, he must now be like the young Alexander, with no more worlds to conquer.

But are there any signs of dissolution at the far frontiers of empire? We cannot but feel mildly hopeful when on occasion our media, in spite of all expectations to the contrary, do manage to stand firm for the truth by calling a lie a lie. This, or something close to it, actually happened last autumn when *The San Jose Mercury News* alleged that the CIA had introduced crack cocaine into the ghetto in the 1980s and the more respectable press, most notably *The Washington Post*, actually went out of its way to investigate independently and pronounce the story unfounded. Now even Oliver Stone, reports Kurt Andersen in *The New Yorker*, has declined the opportunity of working on the Disney film that is to be made on this subject. (Of course it should come as no surprise that Fantasyland has got involved).

Andersen's wider purpose in his piece is to notice the coincidence of the rise of the Internet and the advent of what he calls, instead of the postmodern imperium, our peculiar, late twentieth-century "susceptibility to misinformation":

> Thanks to the Web, amateurism and spuriousness no longer need look amateurish or spurious. If society's susceptibility to misinformation is like AIDS, then Web sites and Internet news groups and electronic bulletin boards—a vast, thrilling, promiscuous commingling of facts with fabrications—could be its bathhouses.

He is mildly optimistic, because he finds that "amid the ongoing spew of digital in-

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formation . . . certain brand names, some familiar but some strictly new-media, are coming to be seen as reliable." In particular he mentions the Microsoft Web magazine *Slate*, which has just started something called "The Tangled Web," or "a section devoted to policing on-line conspiracy-mongers."

But what of such "brand names" as NBC, CNN and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*? Much more familiar than thirst for the waters of truth is the slow and grudging, usually legally compelled recognition of the truth that we saw when Richard Jewell won half a million dollars (according to *The Wall Street Journal*) from NBC for its irresponsible reporting of his guilt in the Olympic bombing case. Like CNN, from whom he also has won a substantial sum, NBC settled out of court and on condition that no formal apologies or retractions were necessary. *The Journal-Constitution* may soon have to do likewise. It is not necessary to be oversympathetic to Mr. Jewell, who is at present submitting to an interview by reporters for *Vanity Fair* so as to further the efforts of his lawyers and agents to sell his story to the movies (he thinks he might like to be played by John Goodman), to feel the kind of exhilaration that many Americans do on seeing the media get their comeuppance.

At least the biggest media conglomerates (*The Journal-Constitution* is owned by Cox Newspapers) are beginning to realize that they cannot rely on the sympathy of juries when they are pitted against a wronged private citizen. Even other corporations may be viewed more sympathetically, if the $5.5 million won by the Food Lion grocery chain from ABC is anything to go by. The network had shown a hidden-camera investigation on "Prime Time Live" in 1992 which alleged that Food Lion was selling dirty and rotten meat and fish—a report that resulted in a sharp drop in the company's stock price and the eventual closing of several supermarkets. Food Lion, fearing itself unable to prove "actual malice," as the libel laws require, on ABC's part, had sued for damages on the grounds that the ABC reporters had used deception to obtain employment and had had no purpose of loyalty to their employer.

This fact was used, not only by ABC but also by most of the major media which reported the story, as an excuse for falsely alleging that Food Lion had not challenged the factual accuracy of the story. In fact Food Lion had denied, and most strenuously, the truth of the original ABC report, and the obvious reason that the jury made the award that it did was that its lawyers obtained, and had shown in court, outtakes from the ABC report that clearly revealed that it was the reporters themselves who had acted as *agents provocateurs* and themselves insisted on putting out rotten meat. Moreover, ABC had undertaken to do the story in the first place at the urging of an organization affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which had unsuccessfully attempted to unionize Food Lion some years before and subsequently threatened to drive it out of business. (For the best straightforwardly factual account of the whole affair, see "ABC's Food Lyin'" by Thomas McArdle in *National Review*'s February 10 issue.)

Not that you would have known any of this from the way that the case was reported in most of the mainstream media. "Maybe the jury showed a sophisticated recognition of the camera's ability to slant or even falsify the facts and to mislead viewers," wrote Walter Goodman in *The New York Times*. Or then again maybe not. Maybe they just wanted to stick it to a big network. In any case he thinks the lawyer for ABC, Bill Jeffries, "was on the mark" when he said to the jury that Food Lion wanted "to punish them for being journalists." In Howard Kurtz and Sue Anne Pressley's news story in *The Washington Post*, the authors wrote that: "The seven-figure punitive damages were unusual because the supermarket chain did not sue for libel or legally contest the accuracy of the 1992 broadcasts."

The operative word there is legally in "legally contest," which means exactly the

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same thing as "sue for libel" but which gives the impression that Food Lion had no answer to the substance of ABC's allegations. Kurtz-Pressley then proceed to quote Bruce Sanford, "a First Amendment lawyer in Washington," as saying that the award to Food Lion was "a case of whipping the messenger, pure and simple," and Jane Kirtley, executive director of the something called the Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press, who opines that "the specter of a verdict of this magnitude, based not on an inaccurate news story but on the use of a particular kind of news-gathering, will have a chilling effect on investigative journalists all over the country." It was only after all this, and in a little paragraph tucked away near the bottom of the story, that Kurtz-Pressley acknowledge that "Food Lion charged that the ABC producers" of this "not inaccurate" story "staged some of the incidents involving unsanitary food, a claim the network has repeatedly denied." There was no mention of the outtake footage in support of Food Lion's contention.

Barry Meier's report in *The New York Times* was a little more accurate, in that he adds up front the clause, "Although Food Lion officials disputed the accuracy of the ABC report . . ." But he relates unchallenged Roone Arledge's contention that "they could never contest the truth" of the story and that "these people were doing awful things in these stores." To Meier, as to most of those who reported on it in the mainstream press, this was just a story about the legal status of journalists using hidden camera techniques.

> Many journalists argue that hidden cameras and other undercover reporting techniques have long been necessary tools for exposing vital issues of public policy and health. But many media experts say television producers have overused them in recent years in a push to create splashy shows and bolster ratings. The jurors, those experts added, may have been lashing out at what they perceived as undisciplined and overly aggressive news organizations.

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Who are these "media experts"? We aren't told. But, like Kurtz-Pressley, Meier quotes prominent journalists such as Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism ("a media ethics initiative" of the Pew Charitable Trust), who contends that "the irony of the Food Lion case is that those pursuing a noble journalistic goal are being punished for the excessive and trivial use of hidden cameras." Likewise, Bob Steele, director of the ethics program at the Poynter Institute in St Petersburg, Florida, says that "this verdict has the potential to chill important investigative reporting and to prompt news organizations to back off." Nor should we find it surprising that Neal Shapiro, executive producer of NBC's "Dateline" was "disturbed" by the award.

But at least the *Times* let its readers know, in a separate story by Bill Carter printed as a box on the jump page, that the outtakes not only existed but had been broadcast by Fox News and "showed that Food Lion may have had an even stronger case against the network because the tapes seemed to show ABC had engaged in unethical practices, like staging evidence of spoiled meat." Needless to say, there were howls of outrage from ABC directed at Fox. "The tape that Food Lion presented is a gross distortion of what actually occurred," said David Westin, ABC president, seemingly unaware of the irony of his protest at being treated exactly as his network had treated Food Lion. Carter reports that CBS, NBC, and CNN were not offered the outtakes, but that "it was unlikely they would have chosen to broadcast it, unless it was presented in full context." Ah yes, the context!

But Fox was, as usual, the only renegade network. All the others fell into line with the view that the jury's award to Food Lion had been a shocking assault on American journalism, and would produce that famous "chilling effect" on same. On the "CBS Evening News," for instance, Dan Rather announced: "A federal jury in North Carolina ordered ABC television today to pay the Food Lion supermarkets five and a half million dollars in punitive damages, that's in connection with an undercover news investigation that proved to be true. But ABC News producers covered their true identities to get jobs at Food Lion and jurors decided that amounted to fraud." Dan Rather then went on to say that it was "important to note that the truth of the report was never at issue in the lawsuit, not even challenged."

ABC News itself, naturally enough, quoted its president, Roone Arledge, as saying that "from the beginning, Food Lion has never been able to attack the story itself. They have gone about attacking us because of the way we gathered it. The reason that the award today is outrageous is that this is precisely the kind of story for which investigative techniques like these are appropriate." Less predictably, however, at least for anyone unfamiliar with the tight "professional" solidarity among TV newsmen, Tom Brokaw of NBC News wheeled out Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek*, who commented that "this is an alarming case because what it suggests is that you can do a report that is substantially accurate and still be penalized for it. And that can set a chilling precedent for stories that news organizations want to do that might cause a lot of opposition on the part of the subjects of the story."

The short honor roll of journalists who saw the rebuke of their trade for what it was would include William Powers of *The New Republic* and Jonthan Yardley of *The Washington Post*. Paul Starobin of *National Journal*, who is also a contributing editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* claiming that "what the Fourth Estate is defending is shoddy journalism, unworthy of the best tradition of investigative reporting." His target, however, is not the network's untruthfulness but its use of hidden cameras, which he sees as being

> part of a ratings-driven descent by the major networks into the swamp of tabloid journalism. Teaser promos for the programs hype concealed-camera feats to snag viewers who

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like to watch people who don't know they're being watched. But good journalism is not about sensationalizing how the story was obtained.

Yet the focus both of Starobin's piece and the letters which took issue with it on those high-minded principles of good journalistic practice was itself a good illustration, I think, of what really lay behind the jury's award to Food Lion. It is not as if the question of sound journalistic principles is irrelevant, but journalists who debate them in public as if they are the only matter of importance weary the patience of ordinary people who are (naturally) much more interested in the question of whether or not and to what extent ABC got it right in alleging improper practices against Food Lion. All the journalistic breast-beating about the First Amendment or the validity (or otherwise) of hidden-camera reports or the sensationalism of the news are just more evidence of the profession's self-absorption and self-righteousness. Such unattractive people, the jurors must have thought, ought to have to pay for their exaggerated self-conceit.

Likewise, Tom Brokaw, interviewing Jonathan Alter, solemnly asked: "Is there any doubt in your mind that we have to work a little harder at getting the public to understand just what we do and why we do it?" This really was the best joke of all, since it is precisely because the public understands exactly what they do and why they do it that they dislike the media so much. Walter Goodman may have been mistaken in affirming that ABC and its reporters were punished "for being journalists," but that does not mean that punishing journalists on general principles is not a good idea. People hate them not because of their biases or their mistakes or their overzealousness but because of their Brokaw-like smugness—something that arises out of a deep-seated conviction that their sense of concern for the public good means the ordinary rules don't apply to them.

It is a conviction, by the way, that they share with Bill Clinton, which is why even the latter's most spectacular examples of hypocrisy and arrogance are all but invisible to them. It may well be as some—most notably the editor of this journal—have written, that the press will turn on Clinton now that he is safely reelected. There are already signs that this is happening. But however hard they may dig and howsoever many secrets they may uncover about the Clintons' malfeasances, whether in Arkansas or in Washington, it is safe to assume that they will never spot the real reason for them—that Olympian self-conceit which mirrors their own, and which has lain outside and in plain view throughout his public life.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, by Mark Jarman (Story Line Press, $22; $10 paper), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Books

Thoroughly modern Burchfield

by John Simon

The new, third edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*[1] is out, ta-rah, ta-rah! It was edited by Robert Burchfield, a New Zealander and Oxford don, author of numerous books on the English language and editor-in-chief of the venerable—if not sacrosanct—*Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition. As editor also of the *Cambridge History of the English Language*, Burchfield made himself a true citizen of Oxbridge. But an ox bridge can be no better than a *pons asinorum*.

Besides giving full due to American English and looking into other Englishes, F3—as I shall call it with a bow to Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*, a similarly daring enterprise in scaling the heights—boasts many other new features. H. W. Fowler's F1, born a year after me in 1926, predates my linguistic interests. F2, from 1965, was a light revision by Sir Ernest Gowers, a user-friendly volume of 725 duodecimo pages, and much easier to handle than the current 864 octavo ones. It was also decently modest. It did not, like F3, proclaim itself on the jacket "The acknowledged authority on English usage," the sort of self-advertisement worthy of Norman Mailer. And F3, of course, has a much jazzier jacket altogether.

It must be faced right off that Burchfield is essentially, though not entirely, of the descriptive rather than prescriptive school of language savants. Although he bridles at some usages, he is also astoundingly tolerant of others. About *of a*—as in "how big of a house?"—he writes that it "may possibly be a slowly evolving extension of a much older" usage; about *comprised of*, he notes that "opposition to this . . . construction is . . . weakening." It seems that "only elderly eyebrows are now raised" at *finalize*; passive defeatism is the order of the day: "We may rail against the loss of a useful distinction [between *amount* and *number*]—and I do—but can it be stopped now?"

There are times, though, when Burchfield is simply wrong—seduced, perhaps, by permissiveness. Under *machismo*, for instance, he accepts a secondary pronunciation with a *k* (mack-), as if the word were Italian in origin rather than Spanish, where "ch" is always pronounced as in Charles. I have no idea why he prefers *e pur si muove* for Galileo's *eppur* etc., as it is always given. Under *marvellous*, he tells us "usu. *marvelous* in AmE," though I have yet to meet an American unusu. enough to stick in that second, British *l*. Burchfield writes: "*Off of* is still strongly present in the language of the less well educated but is indisputably non-standard in Britain." It is just as non-standard in polite America; and what is that "still" doing there? In fact, *off of*, which was virtually unknown in America until a couple of decades ago, has now burst out all over,

1 *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*, edited by R. W. Burchfield; Oxford University Press, 864 pages, $25.

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even among college graduates. So; not "still," but "already," and "even the educated."

Again, Burchfield is categorical about *penchant*: "still pronounced in a Gallic manner . . . in English." Well, it has always been pronounced in an English manner in America, as all dictionaries attest. He writes "de Saussure" for what, without a first name or *Monsieur*, is "Saussure," in the Gallic manner. *Première*, accented on the last syllable, is not the "dominant" pronunciation in America, but the only one. *Remonstrate*, however it may be pronounced in Britain, is always accented on the penult in America. There is no such thing as *rhyme royale*: in French, it is *rime royale*; in English, both British and American, *rhyme royal*. *Pace* Burchfield, no civilized person pronounces *schism* with a *k* sound. The sentence "*Strait-jacket* is better so spelt rather than *straight-jacket*," should be recast, "*Strait-jacket* is better so spelt than as *straight-jacket*." And so on.

Though the principal problem with F3 is permissiveness, its second-gravest offense is fuzzy writing and thinking. Take this, under *literally*, where we are warned about using the word inexactly. "It's a case," writes Burchfield, "of 'stop, look, and think' before using the word in any manner short of its exact sense." That strikes me rather like telling someone hefting a gun, Before you shoot to kill, stop to consider whether you're committing justifiable homicide. Among the suspect examples quoted, two are especially interesting. First, from Nabokov, "And with his eyes he literally scoured the corners of the cell." Obviously, eyes are less suitable than brushes for literal scouring. But isn't hyperbole a legitimate trope? Yes, but scouring without the *literally* is in itself a heightened statement, so that the increment makes it pleonastic. By the way, the date given for the Nabokov quotation is 1960, in which year, according to the Library of America chronology, Nabokov produced nothing that could have contained that sentence.

The next alleged abuse comes from the *Spectator* in 1991: "Zagreb believes that Europe is fiddling with face-saving diplomatic measures while Croatia—quite literally—burns." On the one hand, all of Croatia did not actually burn; on the other, parts of it were burning—literally, I would say, rather than "quite literally," which is redundant. So the question arises: how literal need *literal* be to qualify for literalness? Are scattered fires sufficient, or must there be a border-to-border conflagration? To be sure, Burchfield covers his flanks—or some other part of his anatomy—by saying that a few of his examples exhibit merely "a slight movement" in the direction of "the weakened sense" of *literally*, which strikes me as poor selection of illustrative examples.

The entry on *acquaintanceship* begins: "The logical progress of ideas in a sentence occasionally allows this word to slip into print, sometimes when *acquaintance* would have served instead." Here confusion hath made its masterpiece. What kind of logical progress leads to slippage? Only the illogical kind, I should think. But a slip is surely an error, is it not? Not always, it appears. We get the prompt qualifier *sometimes*, from which we deduce that there are times when a slip is not a slip. So we now want to know exactly when the longer form would not have been improved on by the shorter, but about this F3 keeps mum.

Under *point of view*, we are told that it is "freely interchangeable with *standpoint* . . . and *viewpoint*." That is quite a departure from F2, which asserts that "the idiomatic English is undoubtedly *point of view*." What accounts for Burchfield's change of heart? All we get is, "The run of the context governs the choice of word." Alas, "run of the context" is no clearer than "the logical progress of ideas." Perhaps Burchfield meant "rhythm of the context," in which case he should have said so.

Under *infer*, we get at first a firm distinction between *infer* and *imply*, with all the needed examples of correct and incorrect usage. But then comes the slippage, or slipperiness: "The clarity of the distinction be-

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tween *imply* and *infer* is often questioned, and with a certain justification." The argument for that "certain justification" is that the *OED* (Burchfield's other baby) "gives unquestionable examples" of *infer* used in the sense of *imply*. These examples constitute "excellent supporting evidence from the 16C. to the 19C. (and some less impressive 20C. examples)."

This raises an interesting question: who exactly is a reliable witness, giving excellent rather than less impressive evidence? On this rock much—if not all—linguistics comes to grief. Excellent evidence is usually construed as coming from reputed writers and reputable publications. But are writers, even great ones, above solecism? If famous writers are caught in error, as they often are, why should they be invoked as arbiters? Or is an error that can be found, let's say, in Alexander Pope and the present pope (quite a writer, he!), and in both Powells, Anthony and Dawn, *ipso facto* no longer an error? Does its occurrence in the *Times*—either the London or the New York variety, or both—absolve it from guilt? I think not. It was as fine a writer as Dickens who entitled one of his novels erroneously, and mistakes in large type hurt more than those in fine print.

But before we check out F3 on *mutual*, let's consider one more piece of information it offers on *infer*: "There is also abundant evidence that lawyers and judges sometimes use *imply* in contexts where a layman would have expected *infer*." That raises the question of why lawyers and judges should be taken seriously when it comes to linguistics, and casts doubt on Burchfield's use of *layman* in this context. I would think that the *layman* here is not the non-jurist, as the statement implies (not infers!), but precisely the jurist who uses *imply* for *infer* and proves linguistically ignorant.

Now for Burchfield's crowning absurdity: "Linguistic attitudes tend to change as time goes on," which may be the understatement—or platitude—of the decade. Forthwith our pundit turns prophet: what the "*OED*'s sense 4" tends to legitimate by all those examples "may well become one of the natural uses of *infer* at some point in the 21C." Such prognostication can easily be misread as approbation; where is, at the least, a sense of regret about such an erosion of needed distinctions? True, it is now customary to make fun of Jonathan Swift for having deprecated the coinage *mob* from *mobile vulgus*, which, over his fulminations, became standard usage. But what if Swift was right, and it was enough to have *crowd* and *masses* and *hoi polloi* (not "the hoi polloi," which Burchfield accepts). How many synonyms does a word need? It would be better for Burchfield to be proved wrong by the future than to prove a doormat in the present. The future might even turn out different if the Burchfields of this world took a more courageously combative stand.

On to *mutual*. F2 was clear on this one: "it involves the relation *x* is or does to *y* as *y* to *x*, and not the relation *x* is or does to *z* as *y* to *z*." And it went on to reject "mutual friend" in favor of "common friend" or (lest *common* be mistaken for *vulgar*) "friend in common." This may be a bit awkward, but better awkward than absurd. Burchfield, expectably, waffles away like the best waffle iron; indeed, this entry is as good a place as any from which to start scrutinizing F3. It condones "of mutual benefit to both the Scots and the English" without even noticing that *both* is redundant.

Well then, if we cannot trust even our common friend Dickens (sorry, Charlie!), can we trust some sort of majority, or substantial minority, usage—which is what descriptive linguistics does? Again, I think not, and beg permission to digress somewhat. I can understand, though not condone, a usage such as "everyone [or *everybody*] removed their overcoats"—which Burchfield, citing fancy authorities, cheerfully approves—on the grounds that the logical *his* would slight women, and (here I agree) "his or her" would be clunky. But what about the following inanities that are gaining firm footholds?

Take, first, what used always, sensibly, to be "You can't eat your cake and have it too,"

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as it appears, for instance, in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Suddenly, we hear on all sides, "You can't have your cake and eat it too," as it is listed in the *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings* (1996). The first form makes sense: once you've eaten the damned thing, you can no longer have it. Not so the later, corrupt form: you can have your cake—enjoy looking at it, or keep it in the freezer, or have it set aside for you at the bakery—and then, at the proper moment, eat it, too. But some dolt somewhere along the line reversed the order, and it stuck.

Or take "I could care less," as some dimwit misconstrued "I couldn't care less," and now we are saddled with this absurdity. Burchfield, who records it, adds: "No one has satisfactorily accounted for the synonymy of what would appear to be [!] straightforward antonymous uses." How delicately this is put; simple human stupidity is no longer acceptable as an explanation—therein lies its supreme triumph.

Consider next a persistent American mispronunciation that, widespread as it is, has escaped the attention of both Burchfield and all American linguists known to me: *groceries* pronounced as "grosheries," as if it were spelled "grocieries." This stems from a faulty analogy with such like-sounding words as *glazier* and *hosiery*. False analogies of a similar kind account for any number of errors, yet this has not been sufficiently stressed. So, for instance, "work period" and "play period" begot the tautology "time period." None of this is in F3; conversely, it finds space for the following entry: "*okapi* (Zaïrean animal). Pl. unchanged or okapis." What a relief to know that however you form this plural, you will always be safe.

One could multiply instances—not quite *ad infinitum*, but surely *ad nauseam*. The treatment, for example, of *different than*, *protagonist*, *intrigue/intriguing*, and *cannot help but* I find highly objectionable in its passive acceptance. So what if Sir Hall Caine, as early as 1894, wrote "She could not help but plague the lad"; does that make the tautology respectable? Let me, however, conclude my case against Burchfield and others of that stripe (to avoid the controversial *ilk*) with a discussion of one of today's choicest bones of contention, the misused *hopefully*.

Burchfield, interestingly, groups this under *sentence adverbs*, a term unknown to F1 and F2. I myself refer to it informally as "the impersonal *hopefully*"; others call it a sentence-modifying adverb. Burchfield begins with the undisputed use of the word: "in a hopeful manner." But under the rubric *sentence adverb*, we read about the "bitter war" that erupted with *hopefully* "as its chief focus." He states a general proposition: "in the 20C there has been a swift and immoderate increase in the currency of *-ly* adverbs to qualify a prediction or assertion as a whole," and offers as examples *actually*, *basically*, *frankly*, *hopefully*, *regretfully*, *strictly*, and *thankfully*. "Suddenly, around about the end of the 1960s, and with unprecedented venom, a dunce's cap was placed on the head of anyone who used just one of them —*hopefully*—as a sentence adverb."

On the basis of entries in the *OED*, but not only on them, Burchfield shows that this practice is of long standing. Yet what neither he nor other pontificators note is the difference between endings in *-ly*, and those in *-fully*. The latter (and they are all equally culpable, it is only that *hopefully* is the most frequent) cannot be defended as, to quote Burchfield, "elliptical uses of somewhat longer phrases." Thus *frankly* stands for "speaking frankly," *strictly* for "strictly speaking," and *actually* for "as things actually stand," though *basically* does not expand so readily. But what is *hopefully* the contraction of? (Note that I do not hold with the antiquated injunction against split infinitives and sentence-ending prepositions.) Find me, however, the unelliptical version of *hopefully* if you can.

Simply stated, *hopefully* presupposes a human agent; but who is filled with hope in "Hopefully it won't rain tomorrow"? Certainly not the rain, which, even if you think of it as having Cummingsian small hands, does not hope for its not coming, or even

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for its coming. Well, who then? Burchfield explains the opposition to all *-ly* adverbs as follows: "Conservative speakers, taken unawares by the sudden expansion of an unrecognized type of construction, have exploded with resentment that is unlikely to fade away before at least the end of the 20C."

This is ludicrous, to begin with, because of that "at least the end of the 20C." coming three or four years before century's end. "At least" arouses expectations of a considerably longer stretch. Next, how does Burchfield know, even roughly, when a resentment will end? Further, what is this "taken unawares"? Anyone with ears and eyes could witness this thing coming—first gradually, then diluvially—for quite some time. And it is precisely conservative speakers who, on the constant lookout for such abuses, are most prepared for them.

But, of course, the real cause for consternation—which Burchfield, after noting it, fails to analyze—lies elsewhere. This abuse is a horrible example of cravenly shirked responsibility. In the insecure Sixties, people became increasingly uneager to stick out their necks and say, for example, "I hope X won't be elected." What if your interlocutor was for X? Now, saying "Hopefully X won't be elected" removes the onus from the speaker's person to a nebulous generality of hopers, the ones for whom German provides *man*, and French *on*. *Hopefully* defuses responsibility through diffusion. And when people won't even say "I hope it won't rain tomorrow," the moral cowardice that pollutes speech goes beyond the ungrammatical to the deplorable.

I repeat, neither F3 nor any usage manual I know of perceives the simple but salient difference between *-ly* and *-fully*. Some books, such as Sidney Greenbaum's *Oxford English Grammer* (1996), avoid the issue altogether. *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), however, is gung ho: "the storm appears to be moderating," it proclaims, and cites the Prince of Wales's using the sentence-modifying *hopefully* in a press conference. "What more prestigious cachet," it asks, "could be put on it?" I don't know—perhaps Lady Di's endorsement. Conversely, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1992) notes that opposition to it is growing: whereas in 1968 it was approved by 44 percent of the usage panel, only 27 percent approved in 1986. *AHD* concludes that the word has become a shibboleth.

To my satisfaction, there remain definite holdouts, preeminently Wilson Follett and Jacques Barzun's *Modern American Usage* (1966) and B. A. Phythian's wonderfully jaunty *Concise Dictionary of Correct English* (1979). I reproduce part of the latter's entry because I relish its tone: "Uses such as *Hopefully the stain will not show* are illiterate. . . . *The climbers set off hopefully* is correct. *Hopefully, all the terrorists are now dead* is not correct, unless the intended sense is that they are dead in a condition of hopefulness . . . Like many Americanisms, however, this wrong use of *hopefully* is now so widespread that it will probably become standard English in due time. The reader is urged to resist this growth."

That is the right attitude: a realistically pessimistic appraisal of the situation, but with determination to resist, and hope even against hope. How different from F3's supine acquiescence! But then, Burchfield in many ways betrays what Fowler and Gowers stood for; indeed, in his preface, he is smugly condescending as he writes of Fowler's "isolation from the mainstream" and "heavy dependence on schoolmasterly textbooks," and wonders why "this schoolmasterly, quixotic, idiosyncratic, and somewhat vulnerable book . . . retained its hold on the imagination of all but professional linguistics scholars for just on seventy years." In other words, a book for mere amateurs—but note that faint-hearted *somewhat*. Well, maybe the reason it did not hold the imagination of professional linguistics scholars is that they, poor things, don't have any. Only slavish dependence on what the unwashed say and the illiterate write, with the now added encumbrance of political correctness.

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One wonders why Burchfield was picked for this job when one notes his patronizing tone toward Fowler's book: "It is not, of course, as antiquated as Aelfric's Grammar. . . . But it is a fossil all the same, and an enduring monument to all that was linguistically acceptable in the standard English of the southern counties of England in the first quarter of the twentieth century." In other words: parochial and passé. Yet what the Greenwich observatory was for time, England's southern counties have been for standard speech. Things have indeed changed since 1926 and F1, but we must remember that all change is not for the better, some of it downright harmful. The new *hopefully* can foster needless ambiguity, as in this example from the *American Heritage Dictionary*: "Hopefully the company has launched the new venture," where "the meaning changes depending on whether *hopefully* represents the standpoint of the speaker or the company."

Even in elegant terseness, Fowler is well ahead of Burchfield. Consider F2 on *piebald, skewbald*: "P. is properly of white and black, s. of white and some colour." In F3, this becomes the prolix, "A *piebald* animal (esp. a horse) is one having irregular patches of two colours, esp. black and white. A *skewbald* animal has irregular patches of white and another colour (properly not black)." Quite so, and what was that plural of *okapi* again?

Brilliantly frivolous

Christopher Isherwood Diaries. Volume I: 1939–1960. Edited and with an introduction by Katherine Bucknell. Michael di Capua Books/ HarperCollins, 1,048 pages, $40

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Christopher Isherwood's reputation has stood on shaky ground ever since he and W. H. Auden left Europe for the United States in 1939, on the eve of the Second World War. It was seen by many in England as abandonment, even flight, and ill-wishers scoffed as the two writers who had been the darlings of literary anti-fascism throughout the Thirties turned tail for America the moment war seemed imminent.

There is a certain amount of justice in this interpretation of events, as Isherwood himself was only too aware, though he considered himself a committed pacifist and stated that, should war break out, he would be perfectly willing to return to England and do whatever work the government might require of conscientious objectors. In the event, he did not go back to England, but he did volunteer for wartime work with the Quakers in Pennsylvania, helping European refugees to get settled and launched in the United States. Yet he was never to be easy in his mind about his own motivations for emigrating. In 1944 he wrote to Cyril Connolly that

> our coming to America . . . was an altogether irresponsible act, prompted by circumstances —like our trip to China, and my wanderings about Europe after 1933. When the war broke out in 1939, it was a fifty-fifty chance what I'd do. I was a bit bewildered, a bit guilty, pulled by personal relationships to stay here, and pulled by others to return. I delayed, because that is always easiest. Then came the press attacks, and cowardice and defiance hardened. Yes, I quite admit that there was cowardice—not of the Blitz . . . but chiefly because I knew that, if I returned to England, I would have to take the pacifist position and strike out on my own line—not yours.

In view of the sort of war it would turn out to be, with untold suffering inflicted on millions of defenseless people, Isherwood's rationalizations and his individual brand of pacifism now seem self-indulgent and unreasoned. He tended to confront issues of political or social principle by personalizing them, often in inappropriate ways, a fact of which he was aware: "I have never been able to grasp any idea except through a person."

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His reluctance to go to war stemmed from affection for the friends of his Berlin days, particularly Heinz Neddemeyer, his former lover who had been forced into the Nazi army. "Suppose I have in my power an army of six million men," he proposed. "I can destroy it by pressing an electric button. The six millionth man is Heinz. Will I press the button? Of course not—even if the 5,999,999 others are hundred per cent Jew-baiting blood-mad fiends (which is absurd)."

There is a clear failure in logic here, as well as a lack of judgment. In quotations like the above, one hears distinct echoes of the writer who, in his writing and his life, influenced Isherwood more than any other: E. M. Forster. It was Forster who had declared the absolute primacy of personal relationships, and who had made the statement—felt by many at the time to herald a joyous liberation from the forces of mindless nationalism but in retrospect a deeply disturbing opinion—that if he were given a choice between betraying his friend and betraying his country, he hoped he should have the courage to betray his country. Forster's influence, for better and for worse, is everywhere evident in Isherwood's life and work.

Many people found it hard to forgive Isherwood, either for his initial defection or for the success that, as an American, he continued to enjoy. Seven years ago in the pages of this magazine, for example, David Pryce-Jones attacked him in an aggrieved tone:

> No other contemporary writer was so petted and indulged. Invariably his prose style was praised for making no demands upon the reader. . . . Born into a prosperous and well-connected family in Cheshire, Isherwood was numbered among those who had a stake in the country, as he liked to boast. The family manor house dated back to the seventeenth century. . . . Some rich uncle could be relied on to give him a private income; some influential friend was always ready to bail him out of trouble or to buy him a ticket for traveling.

This is a somewhat extreme view, and while it reflected a certain truth about the youthful Isherwood, it no longer applied to the older one. When Isherwood eventually inherited the seventeenth-century manor house and the rich uncle's estate, he signed the entire package over to his younger brother without a backward glance, readily resigning himself to an uncertain financial future as a screenwriter. The charge that Isherwood's writing makes "no demands upon the reader" is equally reductive: in fact his talent, if never fully realized in a "great" work, produced several exquisite and original minor ones: *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, *Goodbye to Berlin*, *Prater Violet*, and *A Single Man*. He was a master of English prose in whose hands the language achieved singular beauty and lucidity, modestly disguised as simplicity.

For all his faults, Isherwood was hardly the monster of selfishness which his critics like to depict, and the publication of the first volume of Isherwood's diaries offers the reader ample opportunity to make his own judgments about his character. This volume, which covers the period from Isherwood and Auden's departure for America in 1939 until 1960, when he was writing *Down There on a Visit*, fills nine hundred pages; a second one, progressing from 1960 until the writer's death in 1986, will follow. The decision of Isherwood's companion, Don Bachardy, to publish the diaries in full seems perverse. Isherwood looked on journal writing as a duty, and forced himself to make frequent entries whether or not he had anything to say. As a result, at least half of the diaries consist of repetitious and uninteresting material: complaints about boyfriends and neighbors, or injunctions to himself to work harder, to straighten out his love life, to cut down on smoking and drinking, to diet, to spend more time at prayer or meditation.

About the last named: Isherwood had met the Indian Swami Prabhavananda in

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1939, soon after settling in Los Angeles, where he would live the rest of his life. Auden, he wrote, "had his Anglo-Catholicism to fall back on. . . . I had nothing of this kind, and I didn't yet clearly realize how much I was going to need it." "Certainly, my own life badly needed some kind of discipline. I was still suspicious of the occult, however, and hated anything which sounded like 'religion.'" Nevertheless he converted to Hinduism soon after meeting the Swami, and was to adhere to that faith for the rest of his life; he even spent an unsuccessful, faintly ludicrous year as a novice monk in the Vedanta Center on Ivar Avenue.

Only a genius, possibly, can give universal meaning to his own spiritual struggle. Isherwood was certainly no Augustine, and his efforts toward what he refers to as "ego-bashing" are at worst tedious, at best conducive only to a certain cynical, unedifying amusement. When Swami urges him to send thoughts of peace and goodwill toward people of all countries, he observes that it is "easy as long as I think of typical people in each country," but that "for some reason, it is most difficult to send goodwill toward the South Americans." He finds it painfully difficult to focus his mind on prayer:

> Arrived to find the shrine room empty. Tried to pray for my friends, but could feel absolutely no affection for anybody. . . . Then the usual bad feelings—vanity, because Swami came in late and saw that I was already in the shrine; self-accusations, because I'm not in England. . . . Then satisfaction, because, technically, I'm still keeping all the rules. Then sex thoughts. Then resentful feelings toward Chris and Gerald and Peggy and Paul Sorel.

To give him his due, he stuck with it over the years, but prayer was never to come easily or naturally to him. "If I really desire God more than anything else," he wrote, "then I must desire my periods of prayer more than anything else. (I most certainly don't.)"

Isherwood never ceased to revere the Swami, with whom he collaborated on a number of publications including a translation of the Bhagavad Gita, and who was the subject of his 1980 book, *My Guru and His Disciple*. But in the diaries Swami comes across as a charlatan: how seriously are we to take a Hollywood spiritual guide who happily admits his greatest heroes to be Greta Garbo and the Duke of Windsor? One can only smile at Swami's suggestion that Isherwood had the makings of a saint. (Even Isherwood, who in fact had a very shrewd estimate of just how far his own spiritual enlightenment reached, suspected that Swami was laying it on thick because of his usefulness as a free translator, writer, and propagandist.) And the Ivar Avenue monastery, far from being the calm refuge Isherwood hoped to find, turned out, not very surprisingly, to be a hotbed of jealousy and petty rivalries.

Isherwood was also, if not a disciple, at least an admirer of Gerald Heard, one of the foremost quacks of his day, apostle of spiritual growth through hallucinogenic drugs, electromagnetic radiation, UFOs, and other branches of pseudo-science and pseudo-religion—a New Ager before the New Age. Isherwood's tolerance for Heard and his claptrap is mystifying, considering his very real ability, always his stock in trade as a novelist, to skewer the phony and the inflated.

He certainly had no difficulty doing so in his ordinary friendships. On John van Druten, for example: "sententious. . . . [saying] 'What have I ever suffered in comparison with what the Rosenbergs are feeling, waiting for execution?' I guess, when he talks like this, one is supposed to fall on one's ass with amazement at such charity and cosmic sensibility." Or on his sometime friend Peggy Kiskadden: "Peggy is much concerned with the change of life and anxious not to try to be attractive any more. (She will, though.) She is transferring her sexual vanity to her children, as bankers transfer money from a city which may be bombed."

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Such telling, economical strokes of characterization are what made Isherwood's novels so persistently clever and attractive; they are also what make the diaries worth reading, in spite of all the excess baggage:

> Thomas Mann died last Friday—tidily, as he did everything. There was a greatness in his dry neatness. . . . He was somehow very supporting—not because of his great gestures, his "open letters" to world leaders, his public self-questionings. No, he was lovable in a tiny, cozy way—he was kind, he was genuinely interested in other people, he kept cheerful, he was gossipy, he was quite brave—he had the virtues of an admirable nursery governess.

More often the negative predominates. Bette Davis is an "arrogant and not overly talented parrot-faced bitch"; Lee Strasberg an "unspeakable arch-ass." John Lehmann "watches himself with the greatest respect, to see what he'll do next—but alas no humor"; Lehmann's autobiography induces "doldrums. . . . All accounts of childhood are boring, except the very greatest, and his is not the very greatest or the greatest or even the very." Aldous Huxley is fastidious: "stupidity afflicts him like a nasty smell—and how eagerly he sucks at the dry teats of books! . . . Every time I open my mouth he is obscurely pained and distressed. I am such a hopeless ignoramus, such a barbarian."

As is evident from the cast of characters here, Isherwood's circle of acquaintance was enormous. His feet were firmly planted in two Hollywood camps—the movie industry and the community of expatriate European intellectuals, which included Mann, Huxley, Heard, Berthold and Salka Viertel, Igor and Vera Stravinsky. He was also one of the most prominent members of what could be described as a sort of international gay confraternity, including Auden, Forster, Lincoln Kirstein, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, John Gielgud, and Somerset Maugham. The result is that the unlikeliest combinations of people are likely to turn up in these pages: Dylan Thomas at the Players Restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, pawing Shelley Winters's breasts over the dinner table; Bertrand Russell and Greta Garbo hobnobbing at a beach party. (Isherwood, incidentally, agreed with Peter Viertel's opinion that Garbo was a "dumb cluck.")

For all his intelligence Isherwood was a surprisingly unintellectual writer, brilliant at observation, less so at analysis. He was never a very serious thinker; his real gift was for comedy, often comedy of the silliest and most lightweight sort. But because of the circumstances of his life and the political attitudes he struck, he took on something of a symbolic role in the intellectual life of the century. Just what he was supposed to be symbolic of depended on the observer: he was variously seen as a romantic wanderer, a courageous anti-fascist, a parlor-pink, a coward, a mystic, a pioneer of gay liberation. To cast Isherwood in these roles, however, is probably to take him more seriously than he should be taken—certainly more seriously than he took himself. There was always a goofy absurdity about him, which he exploited brilliantly in his fictional self-portraits, and which he seldom loses sight of in the diaries. Though he made an unremitting effort to impose a serious structure on his life, his strong suit, ultimately, was frivolity.

Not so innocent eyes

Elizabeth Bishop Exchanging Hats: Paintings. Edited and with an introduction by William Benton. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 106 pages, $40

reviewed by William Logan

Michelangelo was the last poet to show much talent as a painter. In our narrow century, poets have with few exceptions confined themselves to the art of words: Pound plunked away at opera (with dismal results), Cummings was a rough-and-ready dabbler in oils; but we have been spared the

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sculpture of Robert Lowell and the ballets of T. S. Eliot. It is charming to find that a poet secretly practices another art and consoling to know he's no good at it. This is partly *Schadenfreude* and partly relief that talent is not a gift completely inevitable in its distribution.

After her death, Elizabeth Bishop's cheery watercolors appeared on her *Complete Poems*, her *Collected Prose*, and her collected letters, *One Art*. Modest, sweetly colorful, and full of quiet exuberance, the paintings transposed to the visual world the deceptive innocence of her poems. Indeed, they seemed to have been drawn by children—no set of parallel lines ever parallel, no circle ever circular, perspective lost in some twelfth-century muddle of vanishing points, everything thumbed onto the page with the spirit not of art but of need. "Her method," writes the editor William Benton, "for the most part consisted of making a simple drawing and, unceremoniously, coloring it in." *Exchanging Hats* gathers the surviving three dozen or so fragile watercolors and drawings (as well as two box constructions indebted to Joseph Cornell), some of them now mysteriously missing and available only as slides.

Poetry and painting are not antagonistic arts: artists can live without writing a coherent word and poets can be color-blind. Proudly diffident though she was about her verse, Bishop knew the difference between primitive poetry and primitive painting. Of her own paintings she said, "They are Not Art—NOT AT ALL"; and yet some of what we admire in her verse lies in just its amateurish, old maidish, slightly fussy, and unexpected graces—hers is the verse of an amateur who believes in the professional (Hardy's verse was the other way around). It is the primitive in her poems we respond to.

Bishop made a few botanical illustrations, one or two landscapes, and a couple of portraits, but mostly she painted buildings and interiors. Buildings offered the least resistance to her lack of skill. The earliest watercolor is of a small brick townhouse in Greenwich Village, its windows festooned with long vines of ivy, like wreaths of mildew. Bishop often positioned herself so a building stood foursquare opposite, eliminating any need for the confusions of perspective. The battlements of a school in Key West make it a castle, or a prison. A deformed bicycle has been abandoned outside, near a pair of trees with whitewashed trunks that look as if they were wearing tight skirts. Her other buildings can be slightly terrifying. The one painting of Paris is touchingly labeled, in her clumsy printing, "PALAIS DU SENAT PARIS FRANCE," the monumental stonework and balustrades outlined in Chinese white, as if it were a Ferris wheel. Two statues on the parapet appear to be hailing a cab.

It is not much use talking of possible influences on her work. As the editor recognizes, there's a little Klee, and a lot of Vuillard (she loved the floral); but they have been filtered through an unyielding artistic sinlessness. Her wavering line resembles that of *New Yorker* cartoonists like Steig and Thurber, where the visual is the pathos of its own incompetence.

Bishop was attracted to the painterly, as an appendix of her remarks makes plain; but her watercolors (often helped along with gouache and ink) never got any better in three decades of practice, and there's no sign she thought to take lessons. Her empty yellow ship's cabin resembles the inside of a steamer trunk, and out the curtained porthole is the sea; you can tell it's the sea because the waves are little jagged *v*'s amateur painters use. Those waves recall "Large Bad Picture," its bay "masked by perfect waves" above which are "scribbled hundreds of fine black birds/ hanging in *n*'s in banks." Her poems depended on the loneliness or unhappiness that drove her to words (often cheerful, but just as often rueful); painting was an escape from the pressure of the artistic.

Bishop must have recognized she had no gift for drawing people—the streets and buildings here are eerily empty. Still, in the

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one rendered portrait, her friend Sha-Sha (Charlotte Russell) leans (or floats?) jauntily against a grade-school blackboard. She's dressed for summer, the little smear of lipstick, the plucked black eyebrows beneath blonde hair, the darkly handsome eyes, and the knowing posture a kind of Rorschach. The self-possession of the figure exceeds the crudity of expression. It doesn't quite matter that her head meets her neck in an alarming way.

There's something tender in the one other portrait, of a sleeper who looks like a misshapen doll. In her poem "Sleeping Standing Up," Bishop wittily remade the world from the sleeper's ninety-degree-tilted point of view (some of these paintings are similarly vertiginous, and many almost dreamlike). Bishop was drawn to sleep (as many depressed people are), and people who spend a lot of time in bed are intimates of the ceiling. In one of the best of the still lifes, a hydralike chandelier casts gooseneck shadows on a large patch of ceiling. The editor calls it "untypically arty," and attempts to explain away the cropping; but Bishop wrote "Sleeping on the Ceiling" about another chandelier:

> It is so peaceful on the ceiling!
> It is the Place de la Concorde.
> The little crystal chandelier
> is off, the fountain is in the dark.

There have been many paintings of landscapes, but how many just of ceilings? (Michelangelo painted ceilings, but not paintings of ceilings.)

The difference between poetry and painting lies in their resolution of the visual. In "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," Bishop wrote, "The branches of the date-palms look like files"; but they don't, not really, and not in her paintings (the branches aren't even branches—they're fronds). That is the advantage of poetry—poetry, in the act of naming, is the action of metaphor. The pictorial truth is another, homelier matter. The one painting where the visual approaches the shock of metaphor is a Nova Scotia landscape: there are grassy, overgrown fields, some white houses, a gray spireless church, and in the foreground a low field of blue flowers. Field? No, a pond that looks like a field. But it's not the least like a pond, more a field of flowers in which two rowboats are tossing.

A few allegorical paintings are even deeper within the poetic, allegories in the way her poems "The Weed" and "The Monument" are—dream visions all too nakedly cozy with the psychological life. The most curious, a design for "E. Bishop's Patented Slot-Machine," shows a box with a handle labeled "The 'Dream'" and, inside, numbered gears and a crystal ball. Where do you put the money? What is the prize? Is it the record of a dream, or only a "dream" slot machine? Does it produce dreams for a penny, or perhaps fulfill them? This, alas, is an unwritten poem.

In their wobbling lines, their clumsy childlike intensities, these watercolors reveal a little of a world the poetry concealed, a world of lopsided buildings, nightmarish night scenes, and interiors where nothing met at right angles. For a moment, their defenseless lack of skill lets us view that world through Elizabeth Bishop's not so innocent eyes.

Shorter notices

Homer The Odyssey.
Translated by Robert Fagles.
With an introduction and notes
by Bernard Knox. Viking, 541 pages, $35

Zeus, Protector of Strangers, must be watching over Robert Fagles. Fagles has now ventured twice into the territory of the Homeric poem—a land from which most ordinary translators might never hope to return—and this time he has brought back a fresh, readable translation of the *Odyssey*. A stronger poem than his much acclaimed *Iliad*, Fagles's *Odyssey* gives us an English Homer that is as compelling to hear as to read—an *Odyssey* that conjures the sea-surge

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of Homer's poetry through the rhythms and workings of English.

Consider the rugged beauty that Fagles achieves at the opening of book eleven, the book devoted to Odysseus's descent into the underworld:

> Now down we came to the ship at the water's edge,
> we hauled and launched her into the sunlit breakers first,
> stepped the mast in the black craft and set our sail
> and loaded the sheep aboard, the ram and the ewe,
> then we ourselves embarked, streaming tears,
> our hearts weighed down with anguish . . .
> But Circe the awesome nymph with lovely braids
> who speaks with human voice, sent us a hardy shipmate,
> yes, a fresh following wind ruffling up in our wake.

"Stepped the mast in the black craft" vies with Pound's turn on the same line, and this whole passage exemplifies the forthright dignity and American energy of Fagles's *Odyssey*. Here as elsewhere, the translation captures some of the density of Homeric verse while relying on metrical variations native to English. As Bernard Knox remarks in his excellent introduction, Homer's lines "build up a hypnotic effect in book after book, imposing on things and men and gods the same pattern, presenting in a rhythmic microcosm the wandering course to a fixed end." Fagles snaps his translation out of the trance and steers a different course: his *Odyssey* makes its way by rhythms and patterns foreign to Homer, even un-Homeric, but usually no less effective in English for all that.

In other words, Fagles's *Odyssey* delivers an English performance of Homer with a dignity, passion, and grandeur all its own. But the poem also succeeds brilliantly in small ways. In describing the fire on Calypso's island, Fagles shows us "the cedar/ cleanly split and the sweetwood burning bright"; he keeps time with the Phaeacian boys while they "around the ring [stamp] out the beat." The verse gets tough when the inland forces of the Cicones get tough; and when Odysseus's crew narrowly escapes the oblivion of Lotus eating, Fagles keeps pace with the rowers: "they swung aboard at once, they sat to oars in ranks/ and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke." The seafaring names of the Phaeacians are turned to English: Topsail, Rowhard, Riptide, Seagirt Son of Greatfleet; these are salty dogs and sons of salty dogs. And in a poem where the contrast of the reckless with the prudent is central to the understanding of character, Fagles shows admirable range in fitting speeches to heroes, goddesses, swineherds, and beggars. He can also talk like a lowlife: witness his version of Melanthius's nasty, abusive speech in book seventeen.

This *Odyssey* sometimes achieves impressive results even where it is most experimental—in its use of short lines and in its variations on Homeric formulas and epithets. But the results here are mixed. Occasionally, the short lines seem whimsical or prove disruptive. And while varying epithets may portray the complexities of character in particular situations, it also invites unnecessary psychologizing. As for Homer's formulas, they have a regenerative power in the Greek poem; it is a little disappointing to see them treated in English as if they are mere redundancies. Fagles's verse makes no secret of its creator's divided loyalties; the departures from Homer's lead sometimes don't pay off. Lattimore, who sticks closer to the letter, can better capture certain effects—such as the horror of the suitors' hallucinations; but Fagles can usually out-write Lattimore, and he shows mastery of Homeric horror during the wholesale slaughter of the suitors. Indeed, he is on the whole stronger than Lattimore, because he takes more risks.

Only rarely do we discover Fagles nodding, or in moments of weakness. Why, for instance, does he back down from more powerful language when Telemachus in

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book one expresses skepticism about his paternity? "Who, on his own,/ has ever really known who gave him life?" The English word required to launch the Telemacheia is "father." Even at this early stage, Homer is preparing the difficult pill that Telemachus must swallow when father and son are finally reunited: "no other Odysseus will return to you." So Fagles misses his first opportunity to get Telemachus's story underway. At other moments, he unintentionally loses command not of Homer's meaning, but of English idiom, nuance, and subtext. So, for instance, the Sirens' song in Fagles's version ends, "we know it all." Always bragging, those Sirens. And there is one moment in Nausicaa's speech when, despite my best efforts, I hear Eliza Doolittle: "There lies my father's estate, his blooming orchard too."

These little lapses don't detract significantly from the grand experience of this very grand poem. Still, I could wish for more restraint in some places, particularly in the recourse to special typographic effects to do the work that poetic meter should do. Am I the only reader disturbed by such things? Sometimes the lines are arranged to enhance the drama, when I'd rather rely on the poetry and my imagination. There are several places, as in the description of the Cyclops's "broiling eyeball," where the fancy page layout doesn't add a thing. When Telemachus insists on his authority in the household, he needlessly speaks in italics, and pretty soon Antinous and everybody else in the poem is similarly afflicted: "*I . . . you . . . her . . . us . . . she . . . he*." Italics also disrupt the recognition scene between Odysseus and Penelope. Perhaps the most delicate, touching scene of the poem, this reunion shows the old married couple rediscovering familiar speech, gently teasing and testing the "strange" person each knows so well; it's unnerving to see Penelope's tender cunning in this passage reduced to special effects on the printed page.

Don't get me wrong: Fagles is a very good translator, and he's also a fine poet; but visual cues and typographer's doodads don't make Homer new, they make him newfangled. I was moved by nearly every page of this *Odyssey*, and I plan to read it again. Or maybe I should have it read to me: that way I can concentrate on the good poetry in which this translation abounds.

—Louis V. Galdieri

Henrik Ibsen Brand.
A version for the stage by Geoffrey Hill.
Penguin, 161 pages, $9.95

While composing *Brand* on a meager scholarship to Rome in 1865, the then little-known Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) imprisoned on his writing table a scorpion in an empty beer glass; when the scorpion grew sluggish, the playwright would revive it with a bit of fruit "on which it would cast itself in a rage and eject its poison into it; then it was well again." The play, intended as a dramatic poem to be read rather than performed, was finished under the sign of its gruesome mascot in November of that year. Disgusted with his Norwegian compatriots for their cautious pacifism in the Danish-German war of 1864, Ibsen through *Brand* sought to purge some of his own pent-up venom, while the publication of the play in March of 1866 proved extremely salubrious for his career. What his black-clad, eponymous priest came to embody, however, was no mere mouthpiece for polemic, but a darkly ambiguous and difficult figure that has polarized a century of critics. Such ambiguities are a bit of a specialty for the poet Geoffrey Hill, whose definitive 1978 version of the play for the National Theater is now returned to print from Penguin Classics.

Ibsen called Brand "myself in my best moments," and clearly there is much to admire in his headstrong, visionary "saint." Faced with the complacency and idolatry besetting the religion of his parishioners, Brand declares himself the champion of an uncompromising and absolute commitment to the divine. (Strindberg compared Ibsen's hectoring wake-up call to "the voice of Sa-

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vanarola.") By Act Five, however, Brand's blinkered devotion costs him in the event everything he has: on a matter of principle, he forsakes his mother's deathbed; his child and wife are likewise sacrificed to his obstinacy. In the end, the priest's God-hunting precipitates his own death beneath an avalanche in the mountainous, austere Ice Church formed from vaults of drift above a frozen lake. Were a proper burial possible, Brand's monument would carry his motto: "all or nothing."

At various times, Brand has come to be seen as anything from moral guide to proto-fascist. While the Norwegian production history of the play tends to favor Brand as monochromatically heroic (indeed, the play's denunciation of waffling and compromise rang a note of resistance against Nazism in Norway's wartime performances of the play), Bernard Shaw, for example, thought the character a villain who "aspiring from height to height of devotion to his ideal, plunges from depth to depth of murderous cruelty." Similarly, Auden found Brand blindly driven by "the same pride and self-will that motivate the tragic heroes of this world. . . . [he is] an idolater who worships not God, but *his* God." The tags "hero" and "villain," though, fail to convey the whole story; both are true, and neither. As to the play's tone, Hill characterizes it with a paradox of his own—"tragic farce," in which Brand's fall is played out among the straw men and buffoons of provincial Norwegian life. Inga-Stina Ewbank, from whose literal gloss Hill worked, notes in her sterling preface to the 1981 edition (sadly omitted here) that it is this tension between the base and the lofty, between the crevasses and fjords and the high cliffs of the empyreal Ice Church, that fuels the central movement of the play.

In Hill, then, *Brand* has found its ideal poet in English, one whose own verses have tilled well in neighboring soil. The kinship is such that the play gains resonance when read alongside Hill's poetry, while the poems find a natural extension in the play: both engage morality while conceding the duplicity of outright moralizing. ("I do but ask," Ibsen said, "my call is not to answer.") Consider, as one of many possible examples, the Brandian imagery and intensity of Hill's "An Order of Service" from *King Log* (1968):

> He was the surveyor of his own ice-world,
> Meticulous at the chosen extreme,
> Though what he surveyed may have been
> nothing.
>
> Let a man sacrifice himself, concede
> His mortality and have done with it;
> There is no end to that sublime appeal.

Such correspondences of sensibility notwithstanding, Hill has suggested that his attraction to the play was primarily of a technical nature—the challenge of recreating in English Ibsen's infinitely versatile tetrameter line. Were this the only successful aspect of Hill's version, it should recommend his efforts, as in Brand's final soliloquy in the Ice Church:

> A thousand followers. And not one
> followed me here. Where have they gone,
> then, the struggle and all the great
> yearning to reach the farthest height?
> Their pitiful vainglorious dream
> of sacrifice! Have they no shame;
> or do they think Christ Crucified
> made all sins decent when He died?
> We battle for our souls. . . .
> Worse times, worse visions, they are here
> already: locust swarms of fear,
> war clouds and clouds of industry
> drawing their filth across the sky.
> Deep down, the soulless dwarfs who made
> an empire quarrying men's greed
> set free the stony-fettered ore
> the better to constrain its power.
> They labour so, grow old and die
> enslaved by their own mastery.

Hill speeds this passage along in accordance with Brand's snowballing oratory, while still preserving the integrity of the verse with its music of alternating slant and true rhymes.

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Elsewhere, the four-beat line that serves for Brand's fulsome hieratic flights lapses into trimeter, capturing as fluently the demotic speech of the local burghers. Witness the Mayor:

> Folk here are well content,
> so what more could you want?
> All right, they're a bit dim.
> So let's not worry them
> with talk of "truth" and "light".
> Truth isn't worth the fright.
> Just give them something big
> and they're happy: church, pig-
> sty, it doesn't matter;
> the bigger the better.

Here the poetry itself serves to reveal character. The gabbiness and spluttered clichés, the dopey clanging rhyme on "light" and "fright," the rhyme on "pig-/ sty" (with the enjambment adding delight for the eye): all the material needed to portray the Mayor—with the exception, perhaps, of a fat-pad—is written into the speech. A common problem actors stumble over when playing verse drama arises from their desire to lay on top of the script the baggage of "characterization." The glory of poetry the caliber of Hill's Ibsen adaptation is that that work has already been done for the performer. It's in the lines.

—David Yezzi

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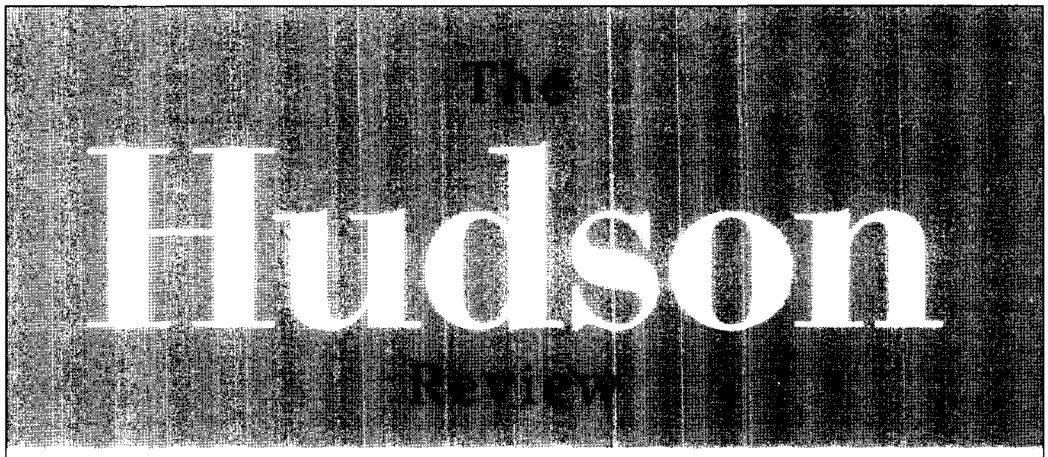

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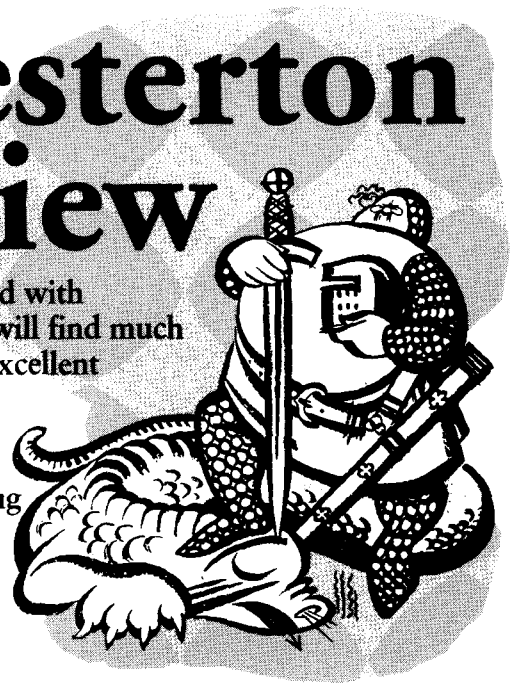

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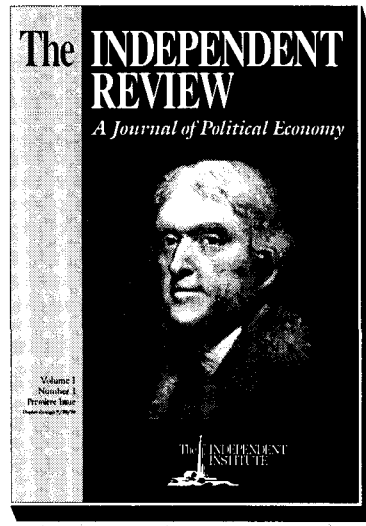

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